



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Education

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Inquiry into the Education and Training
Inspectorate and School Improvement
Process: Education and Library Boards
Briefing

6 November 2013

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Mervyn Storey (Chairperson)
Mr Danny Kinahan (Deputy Chairperson)
Ms Michaela Boyle
Mr Jonathan Craig
Mrs Jo-Anne Dobson
Mr Trevor Lunn
Mr Stephen Moutray
Mr Sean Rogers

Witnesses:

Mr Gerry McGuinness	Belfast Education and Library Board
Mr Ray Gilbert	North Eastern Education and Library Board
Ms Kim Scott	South Eastern Education and Library Board
Mr Paddy Mackey	Western Education and Library Board

The Chairperson: Thank you very much for your patience. Apologies that the previous session ran a bit late, but, if you were listening outside, I hope that you found it helpful. Thank you for your submission. Please make some opening comments, after which members will have some questions.

Mr Paddy Mackey (Western Education and Library Board): Thank you for the opportunity to present to Committee members today. We hope that the occasion will provide useful clarification of our views. With me today are Kim Scott from the South Eastern Education and Library Board; Ray Gilbert from the North Eastern Education and Library Board; and Gerry McGuinness from the Belfast Education and Library Board. I am here representing the Southern Board and the Western Board. Although you have received four submissions from this group, we carefully considered the individual submissions and believe that there is sufficient common thinking across the five boards for us to present a shared view today.

We propose, first, to put our presentation into context. We wish to briefly outline the role of the boards in school improvement: the key principles and practices underpinning our work; and the key priority areas, including our work in support of governors. I hope to cover that section. Secondly, we will address the four issues defined in your request to us, and Ray will take you through those.

It is important to say, as I hope that this will be a theme throughout our presentation, that, for us to deliver on the key principles that I am about to outline requires collaborative working relationships with the Department of Education (DE), the employing authorities, the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) and boards of governors. We believe that we have that collaboration in our current modus

operandi for support of schools. Throughout the presentation, in referring to the work of the boards, I include the Regional Training Unit (RTU). As part of the boards, it will be part of the group supporting schools.

The key principles underpinning the work of our services are based on current research evidence on school improvement, ETI-identified good practice and our experience of supporting schools in school improvement initiatives. They are also founded on the belief that school improvement is most effective and sustainable when it is driven from within the school.

The first key principle is that sustainable improvement needs to be inclusive of all stakeholders, internal and external to schools. We operate with senior management, staff, board of governors and, as appropriate, the community in which a school operates. The second key principle is that regular and rigorous self-evaluation using performance and other data is central to school improvement. The third key principle is that priorities for action need to be limited and focused. In school improvement, it is not useful to work on too many fronts in one school, so our work needs to be very well focused. The fourth key principle is that targets need to be set at pupil, year group and whole-school level, with detailed plans drawn up. We work with schools to ensure that those targets are reasonable and realistic for the various groups. The fifth key principle is that quality teaching and learning must be at the heart of such plans. The sixth key principle is that learning and best practice should be shared. When we identify best practice, we hope to share that with other schools. The final key principle is that school-based support for strengthening leadership at all levels should be contextualised, in the sense that we need to take into account the nature of a school, its location and any contextual factors that could be influencing the work of that school. It is essential to improve the leadership and management at all levels in a school.

The key principles are underpinned by key practices, the first of which is the targeting of support for schools based on evidence from ETI inspections, performance data and local knowledge, in collaboration with employing authorities and sectoral support bodies. That reinforces the collaborative nature of our work with schools and other partners in the education community. The next key practice is the deployment of trained and experienced officers to support the schools in the key processes of self-evaluation, data analysis, etc. We like to ensure that all our officers are well equipped to deal with the challenges that they sometimes face as part of the school improvement agenda. Third is the strengthening of school leadership in schools through sustained and regular support, with the objective of supported autonomy. It is not about going in and running schools; it is about going in and working with those charged with the responsibility for their running. Fourth is the sharing of good practice. Schools deemed through inspection to be outstanding or very good should support those with less effective practice to improve, including through the use of Every School a Good School (ESAGS) television, which can record, so it can be shared with other schools. The fifth key practice is a coherent continuum of support with available resources clearly linked to DE priorities for the professional development of personnel in the school. The final practice is the development of the potential of area learning communities for school improvement. That is about bringing together groups of schools that have a common interest in a particular community and having schools support one another in the delivery of the curriculum.

I will now outline the priority areas. To ensure that support resources are effectively deployed in a manner that maximises the opportunity of key outcomes, support is differentiated to meet the specific needs of schools. The nature and intensity of support provided is based on a range of evidence, and support must embed the process of school development planning, with a focus on improving practice, including literacy and numeracy outcomes. Currently, support within the support services — again, I emphasise that this is common across the five boards — is provided to a spectrum of schools, which includes those in formal intervention, as identified by ETI. It also includes schools found to be satisfactory in inspection. Satisfactory is considered a holding grade, so the support addresses improvement issues identified by ETI for schools so deemed. It also includes schools in which performance improvement will have most effect in closing the gap between the highest and lowest achieving pupils. We will do this through prioritising Programme for Government requirements. A school could be satisfactory in its inspection outcome, but, through the analysis of our data and information, we might find shortcomings in the literacy and numeracy provision or in year group provision, and we would hope to address that. The catch-all is self-evaluation and school improvement plans.

I hope that I have given you a brief outline of the context in which we work, the underpinning principles and the schools that we identify. I will pass over to Ray, who will address the four issues identified in your request.

Mr Ray Gilbert (North Eastern Education and Library Board): Thank you, Chair. As a preamble, and to reinforce some of what Paddy said, the interdependency of all of us working with schools, and our collaboration and partnership, are critical. We must all play a role in ensuring that our young people have the opportunity to achieve their potential, but those roles are complementary, and ETI's role is obviously very important. I will try to pick out some of the core themes that emerged. I am conscious that you have already received a submission from each board.

The first issue is that of the current approach and value added in schools with lower attainment. Underpinning all that is recognition of Programme for Government targets and recognition that standards, particularly in the core areas of literacy and numeracy, are extremely important to the life chances of young people. Much of what we will say today reflects our work with schools and the information that they share with us. We recognise that the Northern Ireland curriculum is very much there to build the skills and capabilities of young people, as well as part of the raising standards agenda. However, some schools would like their broader achievements with young people to be more fully reflected in the narrative of inspection reports. They recognise the importance of standards and Programme for Government targets, but, in the wider spectrum of preparing young people for life, we also recognise that, on top of those standards, the skills and capabilities of young people are very often the determinant of whether they track a successful path in life.

One of the developing features in recent years has been the highly sophisticated use of data in schools to track young people's attainment, set targets for them and so on. We recognise the many challenges in setting indicators, particularly for primary schools, which do not have an externally validated qualification framework such as the GCSE, A level or their equivalents. The data that schools already capture, using standardised tests and so on, is very important. They track individual children, and they set individual targets for children. Certainly, there is a view that that should be very much part of the process, particularly in schools serving challenging areas, for which raising standards, particularly in post-primary GCSE attainment, is a challenge. I am not suggesting for a moment that that should not be our aspiration, but we feel that the work that they do with existing data, identifying what young people are capable of and using that as a way to raise standards is very important.

Another point about current practice is one that we observe and one that schools often report to us. It is about ensuring that inspection is highly consistent, regardless of the context or the situation in which it takes place. In the past, schools very much valued their very close relationship with their district inspector, and they feel that that has been slightly lost. Certainly, we get a lot of feedback indicating that the return of such a relationship would be very welcome. That is because district inspectors and their close relationship with schools is a critical part in bringing together all of the key factors in the agenda for improvement.

In reporting, one of the areas that we want to draw attention to is the definition of performance that is not satisfactory or better. We would like more clarity, particularly when a school falls into the category of inadequate, which, by itself, does not necessarily kick off formal procedures. None of us would want that to happen, but we would like a clearer definition and clearer articulation where performance is borderline. There should always be focus on the fact that we want to help and support teachers to improve their performance, because, ultimately, the young people are the beneficiaries of that.

My final point on issue 1 is a plea that will recur as part of other things that I want to say. Schools want to feel empowered. They want to be continuously improving, self-improving organisations. Some schools perceive themselves almost as victims in this process, just waiting to hear what inspectors have to say. Very often, we say to schools, "If your self-evaluation processes are working effectively, there should be no surprises in inspection; it should be a validation of what you are doing". I will come back to that point.

Issue 2 concerns the key issues impacting on schools experiencing difficulties and gaps in the review process and in the support given by DE and boards. One key such issue — again, this is very much grounded in worldwide school improvement research — is leadership in governance and the quality of that leadership. Again, we pay tribute to the extensive and excellent work done by many of our leaders, but we also recognise the importance of findings that development work is required. Of course, we fully recognise that governors are volunteers but in a much more accountable framework now than ever before. They are critical to the work of schools. They are part of their community support, particularly in socially deprived areas and where there are children with challenging circumstances.

As far as the value-added approach is concerned, I refer to my earlier point about the very sophisticated data-tracking systems using standardised tests and so on that our schools use. So they can use these existing tools to identify the value added. We would certainly like that to be significantly reflected in the outworkings of inspection, across the broad range of development of young people, while paying due regard to the need for good standards of achievement.

I move now to support for schools. Paddy outlined the schools that we currently work with. We recognise that, to some degree, reducing resources over the past number of years has led us to reshape and refocus our service to work mostly with schools in challenging circumstances. In some senses, it could be argued that it is a kind of deficit model of support. We recognise the importance of that work, but we feel very strongly that our profession, as a profession, needs to be developed. The whole concept of continuous professional development (CPD) for our teachers, regardless of whether they are in the most successful school, a middle-performing school or a school striving towards improvement, is, we believe, a critical point that needs to be drawn out. Like any other profession, if we are not developing our people, we stand still, and we feel that, with the challenges in education nowadays, that should not be the case.

We recognise that supporting schools is a changing scenario. I refer to the work of the McKinsey group published in 2010 and how the world's most improved school systems keep getting better. One of the fairly logical points that it draws attention to is that, broadly speaking, schools fall into categories of poor to fair, fair to good and good to great. The way in which we should support those schools and the level of autonomy that schools are capable of handling in developing their own performance is very often the consequence of where they are on the improvement journey. We believe that the intervention is critical. I will speak more about that in a second, but we consider that any intervention, and external support, or critical friend, whatever you might want to call it, is very important. We also draw attention to the fact that the process of school improvement is very wide-ranging. We know that learning, teaching, leadership and governance are critical, but there are many other factors in the broad education family. If, for example, a school is in an area where attendance is a challenge, we need to use the full range of services to support that. If it is an area where there are challenges with attitudes to education, we can use the expertise of some of our colleagues in the youth services, who are used to working with young people in that more informal way, to address such issues. However, this also goes beyond and into the community. In the broad range of work with parents, the local community, community representatives and community groups, we believe that it is important to recognise that, in improving performance for any group of children in any school, those are all very important factors and ones that show themselves in challenging circumstances.

Underpinning the support is the critical friend. Fullan and many other researchers over the years recognised that the external eye is a very useful eye to have, as is the support of an external individual. ETI provides an evaluation of where it believes a school is at, but, once the core development issues are identified, we have a role in intervening, challenging and supporting to address them. I want to stress that inspection, which is critical, is an integral part of school improvement. It is not an event that happens every so often, a kind of "pull yourself up by your boot straps". It should be an integral part of the school improvement journey and perceived as such. Again, I go back to the point that I made about the role of the district inspector as the conduit to, or link with, the external evaluation.

On the question of alternative inspection models, which is the third issue, our main comments centre on building on the very good work that schools already do on self-evaluation and empowering them so that the model of inspection should, in our view, be very heavily driven by quality assuring the school's own assessment of its progress. Doing that will, we believe, empower schools to continuously improve. It will lead to more meaningful school development planning because it is part of our own continuous improvement journey. Hopefully, a range of appropriate performance targets will be set that embrace the Programme for Government targets but are realistic given the circumstances, and interventions can be chosen that are appropriate to a school's position. Sometimes, we hear that schools feel as though they are often the victims of all of these processes — I want to stress that it is only a perception — and I think that there needs to be an approach of quality assurance, of saying to schools that they have a responsibility and an accountability to track their performance and have an evidence-based portfolio to back that up. Of course, for any organisation, whether it is in education or beyond, the value of an external perspective is always hugely important. That goes back to our earlier point about partnership. Again, we acknowledge that one of the things that we should do is to look at international best practice and at systems where different approaches have worked and try to learn from those and apply them to our own circumstance. The point is about empowering our schools. The best organisations take forward their own improvement, and the great benefit of improvement in a

school is the benefit to the children and young people. Of course, that is the core of what we are all about.

Finally, I move to the priorities and actions needed. We recognise the findings of the ETI very often around leadership, learning and teaching and so on. Thankfully, this does not happen often, but I suppose that one of our frustrations is that, if there are significant issues, for example on the governance of a school, there are currently no powers to make changes to that governance other than when reconstitution comes along, in theory, every four years. So, if there are significant issues around governance, obviously the ETI, using the legislation, can recommend the appointment of additional governors to a board of governors, and that has happened in some cases. There is a lack of powers to deal with that.

Also, although we fully support the concept that any person in any form of employment can be underperforming, and that there can be a thousand reasons why that is the case, they have the right to improve their performance. Currently, we have very long and drawn-out processes while, in the meantime, young people are perhaps not getting the best education. So, there are issues around addressing that in a meaningful way, but it is important that it is done in a supportive way, giving everyone their human right to have the right to improve.

We recognise and certainly welcome the Minister's recent announcement to explore the concept of looking at functional literacy and functional numeracy qualifications, because it is important that our young people get that baseline of being able to be literate and numerate to give them the best chance in life. There is a live debate at the moment on whether the current format of GCSE examinations is the most effective tool for functional literacy and functional numeracy. We welcome that, and we think that that will be very helpful, particularly in those areas serving socially deprived young people. We recognise the need for progress around value added and defining the impact that schools are having on our young people.

My final point is on the reporting of inspection. In the past, there was a very extensive process of verbal feedback, and a point that comes up often is that it is important that verbal feedback is fully reflected in the written report. Verbal feedback is very important at an individual level, including if the teacher has just taught a lesson and is getting that feedback. We know how pressurised for time the system is at the moment, but we feel that that is very important. We also feel that it is very important, particularly in respect of follow-up inspections. Many of our schools in formal intervention, for example, will have a series of follow-up inspections. Although it is welcomed, in many senses, that, on the improvement journey, the report is not necessarily a public-domain report that is published on the website, we do feel that the feedback given to the school needs to be as extensive as possible, because it is feeding back on the stages on the improvement journey, which helps to form and shape future action for improvement.

That is really pulling out some of the main themes that came across from the inputs of the boards. I will hand back to Paddy, who will draw to a conclusion.

Mr Mackey: In conclusion, there are six points that we will use to emphasise our input so far. First, we need to develop systemic empowerment for improvement in our schools through ensuring greater emphasis on self-evaluation by moving to a model of predominantly quality-assurance inspection. We are data-rich on the performance of schools. The schools have access to this information, and, through that, we should be looking at a self-evaluation and self-assurance inspection process.

We need to recognise the full range of achievement in our schools and measure school performance against meeting the needs of society in Northern Ireland and in a global context. We need to deal effectively with performance that heightens the risk of children and young people not achieving their potential. We need to ensure that continuous professional development is an integral component in the professional requirements of each teacher and school leader, and we must ensure that there is appropriate resourcing of continuous professional development of our teaching force.

Finally, I think that the theme running throughout our presentation is that school improvement is a partnership process and must continue to be so.

The Chairperson: Ray and Paddy, thank you. No doubt we will get to Kim and Gerry through the course of time.

To pick up on your last point about the six elements and resourcing; you said that resourcing is a key issue. There is a question around whether the savings delivery process that the boards are undergoing and the £25 million that is to be taken out of professional support services including the

curriculum, advisory and support service (CASS) has been achieved across the five boards. Do we know where we are in relation to that target, which was set by the Minister, unfortunately? Do you believe that that has had an impact?

The story that we have heard repeatedly is that CASS is gone; it had been decimated; it is over; it is depleted. All of those terms have been used, yet the presentations that we have from you and from others say that a key component of this journey of improvement is having that professional support structure or system in place. I was worried that Paddy was beginning to sound like Trevor Lunn, because he ended up using the dreaded word "ESA". It reminds me of when we were trying to save the Northern Ireland water system when everybody said that the Northern Ireland water board was the answer. Leaving ESA aside, because that is a debate for another day, we are dealing with the realities of where we are at now with CASS and how we move the system forward. Can we do that in the current context?

Mr Mackey: I will start and then colleagues can join in.

It would be fair to say that the savings delivery plan targets were very challenging and were not all met, and I think that I am speaking for all boards here. However, it was also an opportunity for the boards to refocus how they delivered with the limited resource that they had. We had the conversation about whether we are still a CASS or school improvement service. The service that CASS provided before was a fairly broad-reaching service that included a high level of continuous professional development of all our teachers. A good example of that was in the implementation of the revised curriculum where almost 20,000 teachers received a minimum of three days of training. CASS was able to deliver that as a professional development service for teachers.

As a result of the savings delivery plan, we took the opportunity to refocus. By refocusing, we decided that we needed to target the schools at most need, and I outlined that in the third part of my presentation on how we operated in the schools that we identified. In a sense, we have now moved away from being a CASS, which is an all-encompassing service that included professional development of teachers and many other things. For example, within CASS, we would have been supporting the entitlement framework, extended schools and so on. We still do, although probably in a more limited way, but the limited resources that we have now are focused entirely on the school improvement agenda.

The Chairperson: Was CASS designed to ensure that it helped, or was there for, failing schools?

Mr Mackey: Initially, CASS was delivered as a curriculum support service, as the name curriculum, advisory and support service suggests, but I think that the move towards school improvement and the school improvement agenda has long been on the table for CASS across all five boards. As a previous head of CASS and, more latterly, a senior education officer working with colleagues who are sitting here today, we have looked at the direction of the service. We needed to focus more on the school improvement agenda rather than just curriculum advice and support.

The Chairperson: The work that you have done over the years, as professionals, has been extremely helpful and valuable to all our schools across Northern Ireland. What is your view, as professionals, about whether we should move to a new structure, whatever that structure may be?

Taking the Finnish example, which I did not put to the NIPSA representatives in case they had the same reaction as Noelle Buick; why do we not just do away with inspection altogether? Finland is always set up as great and world-class and the leading education provider in the world, but it has no inspection process. It is all self-evaluation. I will pick up on the comments that you and Ray made on self-evaluation, quality assurance and putting it all into the school. Would that be preferable to where we are currently? The NIPSA contribution raised serious concerns for me because it was said that people have fears that final decisions are being meddled with or overturned by somebody else, even from outside. Do you think that there is now a need for a realignment of inspection, continuous professional development (CPD), self-evaluation, quality assurance and all that?

Mr Mackey: It would be helpful if there was a realignment, and I will ask Ray to take this one. However, it is also about getting the balance right. Self-evaluation is not about leaving schools to do that on their own; there needs to be a quality assurance process in relation to that internal self-evaluation process, and we would be very supportive of that.

The Chairperson: Could you have a CASS without an inspection regime and would that be effective and help?

Mr Mackey: It is helpful to have both. They are complementary in that CASS is there to work with schools in identifying issues and areas for improvement and to work through those with schools. That can be the full spectrum of schools. If you go into any school, you will find some areas that are capable of improvement, but the real challenge is to get schools to identify those areas for themselves, draw up plans to deliver on that and then have those plans validated and verified by another agency. That is where the ETI could have a role to play.

Mr Gilbert: I will pick up on something that I mentioned in passing. Michael Fullan, an acknowledged school systems improver across the world and part of the McKinsey group, said that external involvement is essential for success and that the range of researchers agree on the need for external support to provide information, ask specific questions and promote critical analysis and reflection. It is about balance. As with everything in life, balance is usually not far away from where we should be. In industry and in business, any company undergoing continuous improvement and quality assurance processes will use external measures such as the European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM), Investors in People (IIP) or some other mechanism to bring an external validation and external perspective.

There was a point about CPD. As Paddy indicated, we are in a very challenging time, with austere circumstances, but some of us have been writing papers for a wee while. I remember sitting with Paddy on the north coast back in 1998 writing papers about developing a school improvement service, and there is a need for a focus on the critical friend who complements the inspection perspective.

We also have to recognise that a CPD process involving all our teachers has to have a range of different facets, and this links back to the point I made about the capabilities of schools. Some schools can handle the professional development of teachers quite comfortably within their own means by sharing good practice, exchanging ideas and so on; others need to be given an external stimulus. There is room for a mixed model. I certainly do not subscribe to either end of the spectrum: totally centrally controlled or totally autonomous. We have to factor in the very significant work of McKinsey, which says that where your school is at in its own confidence and improvement journey often determines your capability for development. Like everything else, the less capable you are or the further away you are on the improvement journey, the more help you need. Hopefully, you become more and more self-sufficient. It is a balancing act.

The Chairperson: Could the Regional Training Unit (RTU), as opposed to the inspectorate, become the independent external evaluator or adjudicator?

Mr Gilbert: My view is that the objectivity that external inspection brings, as an integral part of the process, and the experience that our colleagues in the inspectorate bring, through observing practice, is very helpful as an essential part of the mix. I would not want to comment specifically on any particular organisation.

The Chairperson: Do you believe that the current system is sufficiently independent to give us that external evaluation, which is solely on the basis of being for the benefit of a particular school or the particular children in that school, on which the focus lies? Is that where we have an issue?

Mr G McGuinness: We referred to the work of CASS, the school improvement service, over the years and where we are now. CASS can support, advise and provide training courses, but the critical thing at the minute is that inspectors are the only ones who can go into a classroom and observe the learning taking place. CASS does not really have that remit. So, it is back to Ray's point: you can have all the support service and training you need but, at the end of the day, those people are not going into the classroom to observe the learning that is taking place. That is where this is important, whether it is an inspector or whoever else is doing it. You need a person to go in and observe the learning in the classroom.

Mr Kinahan: Thank you very much. You have touched on a great deal that matters, and I like the way that you seem to be going with this. Given all the cuts that are coming through, whether in CASS, the inspectorate or anywhere else — everything is getting tighter and tighter — how good is the relationship between yourselves and the inspectorate? The feeling that I had when they were here was that the inspectorate sits rather high up, believing that it is doing a great job, and does not like to take criticism on board. Yet, all the ideas that you are coming up with are exactly where we are trying

to move to. Are you getting enough meetings with the inspectorate? Are the inspectors listening? Are we actually going that way, and will it improve?

Mr Mackey: Relationships with the ETI are good, and I think that there is mutual respect. There are two ends of the spectrum, in a sense. They are also inspecting our work when they are inspecting schools. It is important that we maintain that division. There is respect both ways. There are regular meetings with the ETI and, as Ray said, the role of the district inspector is very important with respect to meeting CASS staff to discuss issues in schools in a local area. The pressures are building and there is perhaps less time for that than there has been in the past. It is certainly something that will need to be revisited.

Ms Kim Scott (South Eastern Education and Library Board): Certainly, at the point of inspection, CASS advisers and officers sit with school staff and the inspectors and, at that stage, it is very valuable that they share information on the improvement journey and the support that can be offered. It is almost like the Scottish model, and moving towards the model where we are working together. It means that, from that informal stage, the CASS officers can then support the schools to join up their action plans and support them through that. CASS officers are then present at the follow-up inspection. So, there is ongoing dialogue throughout the school improvement journey for schools and, very often, the inspectorate will mention the supporting role of CASS in the follow-up report. The relations are very positive and we are all there for the common goal of improving standards and improving schools.

Mr Gilbert: It is something that we often talked about over the years. It relates to the point Paddy made. It is almost — to use that awful analogy — like the three legs of a stool. You have the school, the external inspection and the support, intervention and challenge from the support services. Take any one of those away and you are in difficulty. As Paddy said, the external perspective is there. The critical thing is that it is in the nature of inspections that they happen as part of a process, then the inspectors revisit and return. However, in between times, depending on how confident the school is in its improvement journey, it requires intervention, support and challenge. That is the role — the Fullan role — that we play in guiding and supporting the school. Quite often, schools prepare improvement plans or action plans based on their broad experience. Like Paddy, I am a former head of CASS and a former adviser. I have always said that one of the greatest privileges that I had in my work was the privilege of going into so many different schools and seeing how things are done. That is a richness that the support bodies can bring.

I certainly want to stress the point that we have worked very closely with our colleagues in the ETI over the years, even going back to things such as working on the original programme management board for the implementation of the revised curriculum. It is critical that we have that balance. We all have a different role to play in the school improvement journey.

Mr Mackey: I want to make another point about that. It is not all good, in the sense that, as Ray mentioned earlier, there are inconsistencies in approaches in the same way as there may be inconsistencies in the approaches from the school improvement services. We do all that we can, and I am sure that the ETI also does all that it can, to ensure that that is smoothed out. However, in the absence of a framework for school improvement, those inconsistencies will persist for some time.

Mr Kinahan: How do you mark the difference between what schools are able to do and what they cannot do because they have not been provided with help from CASS or offered some other form of advice? There must be a point at which schools are going at full speed but do not have the help coming in as you have been cut back. How do you decide what is at fault?

Mr Mackey: Again, it goes back to the points that I raised in my introduction. We are limited in our resource and, therefore, we have to deploy that resource where it is most needed.

The first group of schools that we look at is schools that are in intervention; most boards have schools in intervention at any one time. Supporting those schools consumes a lot of CASS hours. Next, we have the schools that are deemed satisfactory through inspections. That is holding grade. As far as we are concerned, it needs to go up, and we will work with those schools to do that. Through the data analysis, we may also identify specific issues in some schools. Those may be in Key Stage 1 literacy, for example, or in Key Stage 3 numeracy. We will have discussions with those schools to, if you like, fulfil a challenge function with them to say that we believe that there is an issue that they need to address.

To be perfectly honest, the scope of our work beyond that is limited. A failure there is that high-performing schools also need to continue to look at their development. From my experience in the boards in which I operate, there is little opportunity to work with those schools. Again, that is something that the service needs. Ray talked about the privilege of going into so many schools. It is also a privilege to go into high-performing schools and glean some of their practices that can be disseminated among other schools. That is important.

Mr G McGuinness: I want to add to what Paddy said about the high-performing schools. I think that we mentioned the importance of supporting the area learning communities. That is what we try to do. Obviously, our resources are limited, but we try to provide support to area learning communities. In turn, they provide that support in their areas.

Mr Gilbert: I would add that we should not underestimate the capability of our schools. We keep a record of activity around ESaGS TV, which Paddy mentioned earlier. The number of hits on esags.tv is absolutely fascinating; there are thousands of hits every quarter. However, more interestingly is the time of the hits. We have seen a pattern of hits at 3.30 pm, and it is quite obvious that the good and outstanding practice that is being captured on that website following inspection is being used as a stimulus for self-improvement by schools. As I said earlier, some schools are more capable than others and it is a balancing act. I think that we should not underestimate the very good work that is going on in our schools on that continuous journey of self-improvement.

Mr Rogers: You are very welcome. Paddy, I suppose that for the ETI to move into a quality assurance role we would need to have self-evaluation very well embedded in schools. That may require two, or even three, cycles of a school development plan to get it really well in.

I was going to accuse you of glossing over some things, but in one of your previous answers you spoke honestly. I make no criticism of CASS, and I think that you do what you can with the resources you have. However, in order to cover formal intervention and unsatisfactory cases, by the time you get to self-evaluation, where a high level of skills is needed to move people from the first development plan to the second one, you are so stretched. I think that that is the big issue. When you talk to principals, particularly in some of our primary schools, they feel frustrated that they cannot just get to the next level because the help is not there. Do you envisage that, in the future, schools will have some flexibility to buy in that type of higher-level skills that are needed to move up, and that the ETI would have only a quality assurance role?

Mr Mackey: There are a couple of points there, and colleagues will want to come in. When we talk about a move for the ETI into quality assurance, it should be noted that, in a sense, that was started a number of years ago. The Together Towards Improvement document contained self-evaluation material, some of which was excellent and still holds well today. It is used by some schools today. So, there has been some groundwork already completed there.

You are quite right, and I agree with you fully, that there are at least three cycles of school development planning. It is an iterative, ongoing and almost continuous process in order to reach the self-evaluating schools that we would like them to be. Some of our high-performing schools and many of our medium-performing schools will already be engaging in that.

Your final point was about buying skills in. This is where school improvement, the ETI and everyone in the education community need to look at where we have good resources available for schools. That may include retired or practising principals, or principals or teachers in the area learning communities that Gerry mentioned. We have to use that expertise. I have no difficulty with buying it in as long as we have a mechanism to ensure that there is a quality assurance of that input into the schools and that it is appropriate. There is a danger there; I go back to the inconsistency that results from a lack of a clearly defined infrastructure.

Ms Scott: The richness that CASS can bring to that process is when it can bring schools into clusters to look at the school development planning and self-evaluative processes so that they can learn from one another and share practice in clusters together. If schools are working in isolation and buying in services, that process cannot happen and it is, perhaps, not as rich an experience for the school in its development planning.

The Chairperson: The previous set of students left before we could say hello to them. I want to welcome the students from Lagan College and their teacher, Mr Wishart. Thank you for dropping in to see us. Representatives from the education and library boards are here today to give evidence to the

Committee's inquiry into the Education and Training Inspectorate and school improvement process. I am sure that you will all want to pay attention to the inquiry report when it comes out. I wish you well in your studies and thank you for calling in to see us.

Mr Rogers: I wanted to make a point about being data-rich. There is a common theme throughout your responses. There is an issue, because there is no baseline assessment for our children starting school. There is also an issue with the value of end of Key Stage 2 assessments. How do you get round those issues?

Mr Mackey: I will kick off and ask my colleagues to come in on that. You are quite right; there is no formal baseline assessment, although a lot of schools, right down to nursery schools, will use some form of baseline assessment for the children who come into their care. People would say that end of Key Stage 2 assessments have a limited use, but these are only a small part of the repertoire available to teachers. There is general day-to-day classroom assessment and the use of standardised tests, which are built up over time. There are schools that will have quite rigorous regimes of testing year groups and retesting them at a later stage. They can be baselining but also looking at value-added at a later stage. There is a wealth of that. Ray referred to that when he referred to maybe more use being made of school data that are available, rather than just the high-level data that come from the end of Key Stage. It is reliable data; it is used for assessment for learning purposes in schools, so it is used in a valid way. It is critical that it is recognised as that and used fully.

Mr Gilbert: One of the big developments we have seen is that when you put a focus on data, there is always a danger that you will get certain people who just love to collect loads of it. And I think the real development —

The Chairperson: I think it is called "the Department". *[Laughter.]*

Mr Gilbert: Moving swiftly on — *[Laughter.]*

The Chairperson: I don't know what they do with it. Neither do they, but that is only my prejudiced view.

Mr Gilbert: The really significant thing is the concept that data only ever enables you to ask questions. We are now seeing schools being much more sophisticated around the diagnostic use of data, right down to individual pupil tracking. There may be parents around the table, and so on; the quality of input that parents get now when they go to meet schools is a very different kettle of fish, because schools are really getting on top of this and have moved beyond simply saying, "It's the in thing to collect data". It is actually using the data effectively. There is a huge amount of really good, standardised data. To build on what Paddy said, we recognise that. I suppose what we are saying is, "Let's not miss that. Let's use that to good effect". That gives schools a good take on where they are.

The Chairperson: The only caveat to that is, "Apart from computer-based assessment", because that is not really that valuable to parents.

Mr Rogers: That begs the question of why we use assessment for assessment's sake instead of assessment for learning. We know the answer.

The Chairperson: That is a valid point, Sean.

Mr Mackey: Just one more comment, and I think it is an important one in relation to data. Ray alluded to it. The high-level data is sometimes not helpful for schools in that they are set targets that they will never achieve. That can be difficult. In terms of school improvement, it is always better to look at the individual targets for pupils and the targets that that school has set itself in terms of its standards. That can bring about that improvement: when they start to look at their own performance against their own targets. It could be that the Programme for Government targets, for example, could be at a level that some schools may never achieve.

The Chairperson: You are not comparing like with like, either.

Mr Mackey: Absolutely not.

The Chairperson: And it is never contextualised.

Mr Mackey: It is not.

Mr Gilbert: Another benefit, and we see schools doing this work a lot now, is recognising that whilst we understand and accept the need for system targets, we have to remember that a different group of children does the tests every year. Schools are now very good at identifying. We go into schools and they will say to us, "Just to let you know, our results are going down next year", because they know the cohort of children. They have done the CAT and other tests and made their predictions. Of course, they are working hard, and we are supporting them where appropriate, to help those young people to achieve better than the predicted but there is a recognition that schools are very sophisticated now in respect of that —probably more sophisticated than the broader system in some cases.

Mr Craig: Paddy, that was a good point you raised, one that I was going to question you about. One thing that intrigues me is what triggers the inspectorate to go into a school. Is there a consistency across the board? If you go on just results, you have just highlighted the fact that there will be years when those results naturally dip. Do they take a long-term pattern on that issue? In your experience, what is the trigger that sends the inspectors in? More importantly, is there a consistency, not only in areas but across sectors? I have been keeping a close eye on that, and I do not see that consistency.

Mr Mackey: Again, my colleagues will want to come in here. First of all, I emphasise that there is a need for system targets. We do need those targets, and I think they are helpful, but they have to be recognised as system targets as opposed to individual school targets. From my experience, there are two things that trigger an inspection. First, the inspection cycle that is operated by ETI. We will be given information prior to that, that there is an inspection in particular schools. That is the first thing. There is also a facility, which is rarely used, but which has been used and used effectively, through which a board can ask the ETI to consider inspecting a school, if it identifies serious cause for concern within the school. Quite often, ETI will carry that out, if the school is not already included as part of its inspection programme.

I am afraid that I am not aware of the final point about the inconsistency across sectors. I am not aware of any inconsistencies in the scope, nature or range of inspections.

Mr G McGuinness: Chair, it is a very good question and one that we talked about when we referred to the reduction in staff in terms of school improvements and school support over the past two to three years. It is a very important issue. The number of inspections in primary, post primary, or whatever, will vary greatly from year to year, so having a reduced number of staff makes planning all the more difficult. You could, for example, have x number of inspections in nursery in one year, and it could be down the next year, but the number in primary could be up. So it makes it very difficult to plan. As Paddy says, it is within the ETI cycle — whether it is now five years or seven years since the school has had an inspection. That seems to be the main trigger for it. There is no consultation with the boards about what inspections are going to happen.

Mr Craig: I know that the seven-year cycle is built in. However, there are times when that cycle is broken. I have witnessed that. It can be extended or shortened if necessary.

Mr Mackey: I am sure that ETI will also be looking at the data and, perhaps, wish to break the cycle if it feels that there is cause for concern in a particular school. However, we would not be privy to that sort of information.

Mr Craig: I noted that, in your submissions, under enhanced powers, you hit on the issue of what an inspector can or cannot recommend if they identify a poorly performing teacher. I take it that you would be of the opinion, in a case like that — I note that you say that they should be identified for additional support and training, which they must do. I think that that is interesting, because the present situation around that is not clear.

Mr Gilbert: I think that that was the point that we were trying to make in the presentation. There is a need for greater clarity around that. Again, I stress the point that any employee has the right to improve, because there could be 101 reasons why performance deteriorates. We would certainly want to do that because, ultimately, that is a duty of care to that individual professional, but also a tremendous benefit to the young people. Certainly, there is a greater need for clarity around that. As I

indicated in my previous input, it does not happen very often, but, in a process situation where there is significant risk, it is quite a long, drawn-out process.

Mr Craig: Would you extend that to the senior management in the school?. Sometimes you can have as much trouble with senior management as you can with a poorly performing teacher.

Mr Gilbert: Yes.

Mr Lunn: Thank you for your presentation. I know that you said that you were reporting as a group, but I want to pick up a couple of things that are in the detail of the various boards' submissions. I see here — I think it is from the Belfast Board — that schools should be given six months to take action before inspection reports are made public, to allow ETI time to evaluate whether formal intervention is required. Somewhere else, it makes a suggestion that there could be two reports: one for internal consumption and one for external. Can you not see any problem with that approach, from the point of view of a parent who may be considering sending their child to a particular school? They could find out that it is to go into formal intervention and that that was something that arose from a report six months previously.

Mr Mackey: You may let the Belfast Board take that one.

Mr G McGuinness: To clarify, certainly the statement is not suggesting for one minute that if the ETI is suggesting that there are grave concerns, that there are areas for support and that children and young people are not getting the best — there is no reason to suggest that.

We were suggesting that perhaps by the time ETI issues the formal report, a number of actions from action plans might already be under way. So, by that stage, for example after three or four months, we would have already acted on the ETI report. We were asking for a wee bit more time before the report is published so that when it comes into the public domain we can say, "Yes, we accept that there were failings and shortcomings. We have already put x, y and z into place, and we will continue to work with the school on that." It was not to suggest for one minute that serious actions should be delayed for any length of time: it was just about the publication of the report.

Mr Lunn: Maybe it is just the way it is worded: I was hoping you would say something like that.

The other thing that caught my eye, which you referred to, Ray, was a lack of informal feedback during the inspections. I think that is what you meant. We heard from ETI and NIPSA just a while ago, and they are very pleased with the full and frank discussions that there are before reports are issued, and the discussions around draft reports. You are talking about an on-the-spot, instant reaction, which would be very useful.

Mr Gilbert: We recognise the pressures that we all work under in this day and age, but in times past there certainly would have been an expectation that if you had a lesson observed you would have a time of debrief or detailed feedback that would be given to you, so that you have an opportunity. We all recognise the stress that teachers often feel around inspection. That can be heightened if you are observed, and then do not hear anything. The human being in all of us tends to go to the bad place first — maybe it did not go well; maybe it was not an effective lesson. So, on the human side, we feel that sort of immediate feedback is necessary — plus the messages that come out of that.

Again, it is important that, while we do not want the written reports to be tomes, they have to be sufficiently detailed on the improvement issues to enable the school to move forward, particularly, as I said earlier, with the shorter follow-up and interim inspections during, for example, a formal intervention process. We recognise that when schools are placed in formal intervention there is a huge amount of quick work, which Gerry alluded to, that is often done. Sometimes, from a human perspective, it is nice to get recognition that you have done something that has made a difference. So, quality of feedback is really important, and we encourage that.

Mr Lunn: There is one more short paragraph here. I think, again, it is from the Belfast Board. It says that there is:

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

They could join the diplomatic service, whoever wrote that. *[Laughter.]* Is that not a bit hard?

Mr Gilbert: That is the problem. We referred earlier to two to three years ago when you had a professional support service in CASS of maybe 30 officers, 15 of whom were really experienced senior advisers. They have moved on, and we have a new cohort, mainly of assistant advisory officers. Some have been involved over the past 12 to 18 months in schools that have entered formal intervention, perhaps working at the coalface in some of those schools.

It is like all reports: sometimes you get too much of a personalised version. We have to take the median. That is one view, but it is not necessarily the view of the whole professional development service. You are quite right: the issue is trying to catch a broader and more realistic view of that.

Mr Lunn: Have you got a view on the clauses in the ESA Bill relating to the inspectorate and its increased powers? You put me up to it.

The Chairperson: *[Inaudible.]*

Mr Gilbert: The Chairman said we were not allowed to speak about this. No, obviously, I would not speak specifically about the draft Bill, but certainly we hope that the partnership and complementary working will be the way into the future, as it has been in the past.

Mr Lunn: Without asking you to comment on the specifics of the draft Bill, would you venture to take a view on whether there is much difference between what is in the ESA Bill and the current powers of the inspectorate? Some of us think that those clauses just draw together the various orders and regulations that apply to the inspectorate and put them into one document. That cannot be a bad thing. I am not going to draw you at all here.

Mr Gilbert: I have no particular view.

The Chairperson: Paddy, Ray, Gerry and Kim, thank you very much for your submission and input into the inquiry. We look forward to continuing to work with you, and I wish you well in your respective boards and your responsibilities.