



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

The Association of School and College Leaders represents 17000 post primary school leaders nationally. Here in Northern Ireland, ASCL represents the Principals and Senior Leaders in most of our largest schools across all sectors. ASCL members have responsibility for the education of 45% of all post primary pupils in Northern Ireland and given their level of responsibility and commitment to the success of our schools, they wish to offer their frontline experience in the planning for the future at this critical time in the evolution of our education system.

1.

The view of the association is that the current measures of school performance and benchmarked comparison in inspections do not always reflect the true value added to pupil attainment by schools and by implication the quality of leadership in those schools.

At the ASCL NI Annual Conference in November 2012, Minister John O Dowd challenged ASCL to become involved in improving the overall quality of leadership in schools as it is a key factor in system improvement. Since then the association has been working closely with DE, ESAIT, ETI and the University of Ulster in devising new approaches to leadership development. An important starting point is agreement on effective leadership practice and recognition of the school contexts in which leadership and school improvement are operating. Support for school leaders in difficult circumstances, improved leadership training pathways and increased sharing of accountability by middle leaders in schools are therefore ideas being explored and ASCL will continue to offer its expertise to aid this process.

2.

The practice of using the percentage of pupils entitled to Free School Meals to categorise and compare school performance during inspection is not always an accurate or useful measure. The coalition government in England is now moving away from context value added indicators due to concerns about their robustness. The association of lowest funded education authorities in England, F 40, argue strongly that a system based on classroom behaviour and parents' education taken together with educational attainment is a better indicator of social deprivation. Briefing papers to the Education Committee on the robustness of the Free School Meals measure confirm these concerns. The Northern Ireland Assembly Briefing paper 39/11 published in February 2011 conducts a thorough analysis of current value added measures. It notes that there is now widespread use in the post primary sector of private testing instruments such as midYIS, yellis and ALIS to assess and track pupil progress but emphasises the inability of the Department of Education's InCAS tests in primary schools to be coordinated with these to achieve on-going tracking cross- phase.

3.

In a published Statement of Intent 2013 on School and College Performance Tables, the Department of Education in England has as its major recommendation the intention to introduce three year averages for headline key stage 2 and key stage 4 pupil attainment. This does not happen for key

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stage 2 in N Ireland and current approaches to average examination benchmarks can fail to recognise real achievement in a school. While literacy and numeracy levels, expressed as % level 5 and % level 4 are included now in Northern Ireland inspection reports for incoming Year 8 pupils, they are not used as a statistical comparator or a standardised baseline for calculating value added improvement in pupil achievement, as in England. These levels are used rather to provide anecdotal contextualisation. Qualifying paragraphs appear in inspection reports like – “ a very mixed ability intake for a selective school”, to explain below average public examination outcomes. These key stage 2 levels are not factored in to the overall judgement of a school in terms of inspection grade. State sponsored, standardised, numeracy and literacy tests at 7,11 and 13 would allow accurate mapping of pupil progress and could be used to set key stage 4 and 5 targets. An effective value added measure is therefore missing in our system. The former transfer test, while imperfect, at least provided standardised, system wide, benchmarking for a very large percentage of each pupil tranche. Attempts to replace this measure have not been effective in producing comparable benchmarks to date.

4. Anecdotal feedback from recent inspections suggests an overemphasis on headline statistics. Schools are being challenged for example, for allowing U6 pupils to sit 2 A Levels and an AS course rather than 3 A levels, because this lowers the A*-C pass overall. Another example of statistical misdirection would be a school with a 6th Form of 100 having 10 pupils achieving 3 A grades each and the remaining 90 pupils getting 3 C grades each coming out with a higher headline A Level average, than a comparable school where 95 pupils get 3 A passes and 5 pupils get 2 A passes and a D. More discriminating measures are needed including credit for pupils achieving 3 + A levels at grades A-D.

5. While ASCL acknowledges the need for inspections to canvas staff opinions, we wish to put on record our deep concern at the manner in which current survey processes can operate to the detriment of school leader morale and school improvement generally. To achieve a change in accountability culture and challenge underperformance requires resolute, determined leadership. Care must be taken to ensure that effective leaders are not undermined and that staff comments/complaints are balanced by the inclusion of a survey filled out by the Principal and VPs on staff training, performance issues, mentoring, support staff, staff absence etc. to achieve a more rounded view.

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