

Council for the Curriculum Examinations and Assessment

Northern Ireland Assembly Committee for Education

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

The terms of reference for the Committee Inquiry are as follows: the Committee will

- *Review the effectiveness of ETI's current approach in respect of school inspection / improvement – considering particularly how ETI assesses the value added in those schools which have lower levels of examination attainment;*
- *Identify the key issues impacting on schools experiencing difficulties and any gaps both in terms of the ETI review process and the support services provided by the Department or the ELBs;*
- *Identify and analyse alternative approaches and models of good practice in other jurisdictions in terms of school inspection, the assessment of value added and improvement;*
- *Consider what priorities and actions need to be taken to improve ETI's approach to the school improvement process including the need for enhanced powers; alternative measures of achievement; improved governance; and transparency; and*
- *Report to the Assembly on its findings and recommendations by January 2014.*

Written responses are sought from all stakeholders by Friday 23 August 2013. Oral evidence will be taken in October 2013. The Committee expects to publish the report on its Inquiry in January 2014.

Request for Written Evidence: CCEA Submission (August 2013)

This submission relates mainly to the areas of:

- the assessment of value added (particularly how ETI assesses the value added in those schools which have lower levels of examination attainment); and
- alternative measures of achievement.

Introduction

The School Improvement Process is based on the principle of school self-evaluation, supported by the processes and qualitative indicators set out in *Together Towards Improvement*.

A revised curriculum was introduced in Northern Ireland, phased since 2007, and revised assessment and qualifications arrangements are being introduced to support this. There have been a number of changes in emphasis since the introduction of the revised NI Curriculum. This includes an increasing emphasis on the use of outcomes data for a range of purposes. Schools have expressed concerns about the uses to which this data may be put, particularly in a period of close scrutiny on the sustainability of schools and perceptions

of competition between schools for pupils. In relation to qualifications there is an emphasis on the achievement of A* to C grades in 5 subjects including English and Mathematics.

Limitations of Data

It is unwise to draw too many inferences from any one measure (teacher assessment or test), particularly if that measure has been designed for different purposes, particularly if these purposes are considered 'high stakes'.

Assigning 'high stakes' to educational assessments, including qualifications, can influence behaviours and cause unintended and undesirable consequences including behaviours that threaten the integrity of the process. Accountability is critical to the success of a system but reliance on a limited range of indicators should be avoided. It is critical that accountability measures are broad and holistic, based more on educational value that is added by high quality interventions than on unsophisticated absolute measures. In this way some of the risks and unintended consequences of using educational assessments for purposes other than they were designed can be minimised.

CCEA facilitated twelve End of Key Stage Assessment workshops over six days at locations across Northern Ireland in June 2013. Principals, or their representatives, from all primary and post primary schools in Northern Ireland were invited, and a total of 398 attended. The events aimed to gather stakeholders' views on the end of Key Stage assessment arrangements.

Views were expressed by the majority of the groups that the use of data and target setting should be fundamentally reviewed. Participants' perception was that ETI and other agencies focus on a narrow range of measures such as end-of-key-stage levels and GCSE grades A* to C. Participants felt that there should be an acknowledgement that learners are starting from different points, for example by taking learners with special educational needs (SEN) and English as an additional language (EAL) into consideration. It was also felt that there needs to be an acknowledgement that there are differences between cohorts – as a school cohort varies in any one year and inputs into the system may vary there should be flexibility with targets, with a pupil-focused, value-added approach. There was a strong view that data should be contextualised; for example, the size and make-up of the school are important factors that must be considered within the data. There was strong support for the use of standardised tests, as it was felt that these would allow for the valid tracking of progression.

Finally, the majority of groups spoke about being content for their school to be accountable but said that it is how they are made accountable that matters. Therefore data alone, such as percentages of levels/grades, should not be used to judge school success or as a basis for funding. Additionally, a large number of participants commented that the current measure of free school meal entitlement (FSME) is not a valid benchmark for funding without consideration of other factors such as those outlined above. There has been an increase in allegations of teacher malpractice and behaviours such as overmarking to the edge of tolerance. Such behaviours threaten both the integrity of the examination process and the confidence of stakeholders in the system. The reasons for this rise in cases is not known although it has been suggested that it may be a reflection of the pressure felt by teachers because of the 'high stakes' placed on examinations.

Alternative Measures of Achievement

In this context, and in order to be effective, the different elements of an assessment and evaluation framework must align with educational objectives of learners and the system as a whole. All of these objectives should be learner centred. Consideration should be given to an assessment/accountability framework which recognises the position of established measures within the framework, but which uses a range of quantitative and qualitative information and which shifts the focus of accountability to effective governance.

School accountability should be focused on governance and school self-evaluation, on how schools use analysis of a range of available data, including examination results, end-of-key-stage outcomes and standardised tests, to identify areas for attention, to effect improvement and to gauge the effectiveness of interventions.

Consideration should be given to addressing gaps such as those identified in the PWC *Final Report on School and Pupil Performance Data* (November 2008), for example:

- suitable baseline measurement and longitudinal data;
- increased focus on qualitative indicators (such as those within *Together Towards Improvement*) to provide a more holistic view of the achievements of individual young people and schools;
- additional measures of performance to guard against the potential risk of perverse performance incentives;
- measures of deprivation and other contextual data in the development of any value-added measure.