

## **Paper 13**

### **SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT**

#### **Introduction**

This paper focuses on the emergent thinking on School Improvement Policy and on the implications for RPA and, for the RPA legislation. There are considerable weaknesses in the existing legislative framework. The paper represents the broad direction of travel. The paper is based on the assumption that there will be an Education and Skills Authority (ESA).

#### **The Current Position**

2. There is a degree of complacency about the performance of the school system in Northern Ireland which masks a degree of underperformance (for example, nearly 39% of pupils do not achieve a level 2 in GCSE) and a significant gap between those schools which are high performing and those which are either under-performing (“coasting” schools) or performing below an acceptable standard. In an increasingly competitive world, collectively and individually, the Department must put high quality and standards at the centre of its overall strategy in the interests of children, the economy and society. The emerging view in the policy work is that insufficient emphasis is given to improving schools in the current strategy; the legislative base is weak; the accountabilities are not sufficiently understood; and the current process, which is focused on performance in only the lowest performing schools, is no longer fit for purpose.
  
3. The Department’s strategic framework includes the need to pursue quality and raise standards but it sits alongside a number of other important aims. The raising of standards is reflected strongly in the Department’s Public Service Agreement targets and is part of the accountability discussions with ELB Chief Executives but it is not yet given the highest priority. Education is about positive experiences, breadth of curriculum, and personal development but, in

the interests of the individual and society in general, the pursuit of the highest standards and the drive to ensure that all children achieve to their highest potential must be paramount. A reflection of the comparative lack of strategic priority is the weakness of the legislative base. There is no specific school improvement legislation. The Department relies on a broad general duty to provide effective education.

### **Possible Principles and Responsibilities for a Revised Policy**

4. In re-assessing the current approach it is suggested that the Department should adopt the following principles:
  - the interests of pupils should be at the centre of the policy;
  - each and every school is capable of improvement;
  - the school, its Principal and Board of Governors, should be accountable for the performance/standards of the pupils in the school;
  - the improvement process requires working together [school leadership, governors, teachers, other staff, pupils, parents, the wider community, the managing authority and ESA];
  - there is a need to acknowledge and celebrate success as well as identifying failure/underachievement;
  - the school should be capable of identifying and addressing early, its own weaknesses through critical self evaluation and school development planning; and
  - all interventions require an exit strategy.
  
5. In looking forward, there are four main players in the process whose responsibilities and accountabilities must be clearer than they are now
  - (1) the Department should be accountable to Parliament for the overall performance of the school system, and for monitoring the effectiveness of the work of ESA in School Improvement;

- (ii) the ETI should continue to be responsible for inspecting schools (and re-inspecting where necessary) and for reporting the outcomes of inspection to the Department, ESA, the Boards of Governors and to the public;
- (iii) the ESA should be responsible for monitoring the performance of individual schools, for challenging schools about their performance, for providing the necessary support to schools, especially those which are under-performing; and for taking, with the Board of Governors, the actions required with those schools, whose standards need to be raised significantly; and
- (iv) in line with proposals for school autonomy the principal and board of governors should be responsible and accountable for the quality of education provision in school and the standards attained by the pupils, especially in respect of performance in assessments and examinations – the accountability is to ESA, in the first instance, and, ultimately, to the Department;

6. In legislative terms, the Department should be under a specific duty and be given a general power to put in place the necessary arrangements to effect school improvement (including the making of regulations). It should also ensure that quality, capable of being tested against recognised standards, is the duty of every school. This implies a general duty on school Boards of Governors and principals to promote high quality and standards. It is recognised that for Boards of Governors, who participate in a voluntary capacity, this will be a challenging responsibility. However it is important that principals see this as their main duty and, in any case, improvement can only come from within the school (with, perhaps, necessary external support). In respect of ESA it implies that it will have a function to secure high standards of provision a general duty (to monitor, challenge and support schools), a right of access to schools (though not to classrooms, nor to carry out inspections) and powers to enable it to carry out its role and, in particular, to intervene in schools to take the actions necessary (with the board of governors) to effect change. The purpose of these changes is to bring quality and standards to the forefront of the engagement in every school between the Board of

Governors and the principal, and to provide ESA with the strategic focus on improvement and the powers to enable it to carry out its role effectively.

## **The School Improvement Process**

7. For every school the policy is likely to propose self-evaluation and self-improvement. There is in place a number of mechanisms to assist schools in these processes. In addition to the provision across the system of highly qualified teachers, these include School Development Planning and Target-Setting; PRSD; Staff and Curriculum Development and Leadership Training; current Curriculum Advisory and Support Service and Council for Catholic Maintained Schools support and Inspectorate's ETI publications on Self-Evaluation. Schools also have access to considerable data, through C2K, though the last Chief Inspector's Report suggests that not enough schools make effective use of it. In shaping the policy the coherent use of all these mechanisms to support self-improvement will be highlighted. A key question, is how quality should be defined. We will seek agreement on what would provide a reasonably rounded view of the quality of a school's provision, which must include assessment and examination performance. This will be brought together in a common set of Performance Indicators (PIs) as a transparent base for monitoring and for making judgements by the school, ESA, ETI and the Department. These indicators will be applied by the school and ESA, using benchmarked information on the indicators against schools of a similar type and size.
  
8. In terms of the intended process for all schools, given the proposed new duties and powers, it will be the responsibility of ESA to monitor, challenge, support and take action where necessary. ESA will require systems to enable this to be done effectively and, there should be an annual meeting between the principal, school governors and ESA representatives to discuss the school's performance against the PIs. ESA will be aware of the context of the school. It is intended that there should be incentives available to ESA to encourage high performing schools to share their best practice; and specific interventions, for ESA, for those schools which are coasting or where

standards are slipping, or are below an acceptable level. These interventions should allow a “graduated response” by ESA. These could include the requirement on the school to produce an action plan setting out the remedial actions to be taken, and ESA requesting an ETI inspection of the school; or the power to link a school with another higher performing school to learn of better practice; or to insist on leadership/management training; or to put in management support. We need to consider further how far we wish ESA’s powers to go. The Department may reserve to itself more stringent powers. School improvement could be vested in the Department initially, with basic sanctions delegated to ESA, and other stronger powers retained by DE.

9. It is the emerging view that, as in England and Wales, there is a confirming need for a more formal process linked to ETI inspection. ETI inspects a school in the round, quantitatively and qualitatively, within its own context and benchmarked against schools of a similar type; it inspects in a completely impartial way and reports directly to the Department. On current thinking, if a school is reported as performing exceptionally well this should result in some positive recognition, both material and presentational. If on the other hand, the school is reported as performing below an acceptable level, this should result in its entry into a formal improvement process. In this process ESA may take initial action if matters are judged to be sufficiently serious; it could provide additional support to address specific, identified weaknesses; and the school should be subject to a re-inspection (on perhaps two occasions). Where the school improves, it can exit the process; if it is reported by ETI as failing to improve after two re-inspections, this could spark formal discussions with the managing authority about mergers, closure or a fresh start. This formal process should have a finite time limit of 2-3 years.
10. To ensure consistency of approach and the effectiveness of the policy the Department will need to ensure that the professional aspects of ESA’s work can be inspected; it may also need to ensure that DE can initiate value for money studies, efficiency studies etc. It may be necessary to set out in primary legislation (though subordinate legislation would be preferred) the

specific interventions which the Department may need, to ensure that ESA does its job effectively

11. In 2001, the decision was taken to drop performance tables. This has created a comparative lack of information to parents about schools. The inspection report is published but inspection is, in general, carried out on a lengthy cycle. ESA should consider how best to inform parents about the bench-marked performance of local schools or their child's school, perhaps through a website. The Department will have to consider how best to reflect a "value-added" dimension; this will require a specific research exercise around the agreed PI's. Powers may exist already for this but it would be helpful if schools and ESA had a legal obligation to comply with any request from DE to provide information and to publish it either at an individual school level or area level, in such form as DE may require.
12. A key dimension of the revised policy will be the need to draw out and share lessons about good and poor practice. This can be used to inform poorly performing schools about ways to improve; it should influence strongly the agenda of ESA's professional service and link to initial teacher education and teacher professional development.

## **Conclusion**

13. This paper reflects the emerging views on a revised policy on school improvement. It sets out the case for quality and standards to have the highest priority in the Department's overall strategy and for an enhanced legislative base for school improvement. It defines responsibilities and accountabilities. It recommends that the focus should be on improvement in every school and that there should be incentives to develop and share good practice as well as interventions related to poor performance. It suggests the continuing need for a formal process for the worst performing schools, linked to ETI inspection outcomes, with a finite time limit for improvement. It argues for a combination of general duties and specific powers to be enshrined in legislation. ESA will need to be given powers to enforce the policy. The

Department will need to be given powers to ensure that ESA carries out its role effectively. The key players in the process are deemed to be the school, which must effect improvement, and ESA, which is given the primary role in the whole system. The Department's role is to oversee the working of the process and, at least initially, to hold the most contentious of the sanctioning powers. This is based on the view, formed from experience, that the Department is best placed, in extreme situations, to press for significant change.

**School Improvement Division**

**28<sup>th</sup> November 2006**

## **ANNEX A**

### **ACCOUNTABILITIES**

School Improvement involves the pursuit of a higher quality of education and raised standards of performance for all pupils in all schools. There are a number of key players in the school improvement process. Clearly the pupils and their parents have a responsibility to take the opportunities provided by some 12 years of compulsory education. While education is there to be experienced and enjoyed, schools require the participation and active support of parents in ensuring that children behave in school, approach their studies in a diligent fashion, co-operate with their teachers and other staff, complete their homeworks and realise their full potential. However:

- (i) The school has the primary responsibility for ensuring that its ethos, its leadership, its organisation, its pastoral care system, its teaching and its curricular provision provide pupils with the opportunities to succeed and that appropriate emphasis is placed on pupils' performance in assessments and examinations.
- (ii) The Board of Governors of a school has responsibility for ensuring that the Principal and his or her staff put in place all the necessary arrangements and mechanisms to help pupils succeed.
- (iii) The Board of Governors and the Principal will be accountable to the Education and Skills Authority for the quality of provision and the standards attained by its pupils.
- (iv) The Education and Training Inspectorate will be responsible for inspecting all aspects of a school and reporting the outcomes of inspection to the Board of Governors of the schools, the Education and Skills Authority and the Department.
- (v) The Education and Skills Authority will have primary responsibility for monitoring the performance of individual schools, particularly the standards of

attainment; for challenging schools about their performance; for providing the necessary support to schools, especially those which are under-performing; and for taking the actions required to deliver and sustain improved performance in those schools where it is deemed unacceptable.

- (vi) The Authority will be accountable to the Department of Education for the effectiveness of its delivery of these responsibilities.
  
- (vii) The Department of Education will determine the nature of the School Improvement Policy within the context of its overall strategy; will monitor and report on the performance of the overall school system and will hold the Chief Executive of the Education and Skills Authority to account for the performance of the authority in school improvement.