

The Professor Seamas Ó Súilleabháin Memorial Lecture 2012

National University of Ireland – Maynooth

**The Quality Assurance of Irish Schools
and the Role of Evaluation:
Current and Future Trends**

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Réamhrá

A Uachtaráin Philip, a Chaothaoirleach Aidan, a dhaoine uaisle go léir:

Is mór agam an cuireadh a fuair as ó Roinn an Oideachais in Ollscoil na hÉireann ag Má Nuaid an léacht seo i gcuimhne ar an Ollamh Ó Súilleabháin a thabhairt anseo anocht. Nuair a bhíos féin im' mhac léinn, duine mór le rá san Oideachas ba ea an Bráthair Ó Súilleabháin. Bhí an t-ádh liom go raibh seans agam léachtanna agus páipéir eirimiúla a chloisteáil uaidh ag comhdhálacha de chuid ESAI agus ag ócáid nó dhó eile.

Caithfidh mé a admháil go gcuireann sé roinnt faitís orm iarracht a dhéanamh léacht a thabhairt in onóir oideachasóra chomh hoilte, chomh gairmiúil agus chomh séimh is a bhí an Bráthair Ó Súilleabháin. Is dócha gur ceart dom “Maith dom mo laigí agus mo bhotúin” a rá roimh ré nó b'fhéidir gur fearr “Mea culpa, mea maxima culpa” a úsáid sa timpeallacht stairiúil seo!

Ar aon nós, céard faoi théama mo léacht anocht?

The parameters of this talk

Let me be clear about the parameters of my talk tonight. Firstly, most of my comments and reflections will be about the first and second-level education systems, because most of the work of Inspectorate is focussed at these levels. I am only too conscious that high quality early childhood education is at least as important as either primary or post-primary education provision in securing good educational outcomes for children. However, while the Inspectorate is currently involved with the HSE Inspectorate in a pilot joint evaluation of early childhood provision, limitations of time prevent me from discussing that area further. Nor shall I refer to the third-level sector or the further education sector in any detail, although I recognise that all these levels are inter-dependant.

Secondly, my focus will be on developments regarding the quality assurance of Irish schools and centres for education. Within this theme, I recognise that there are many actors that have a role in ensuring that children and young people have the opportunity to engage in effective learning experiences in schools. The quality of the curriculum that is taught in schools; the quality of the professional education provided to teachers and school leaders in both initial teacher education and during

the course of their careers; the quality of the facilities and resources available to schools; and the supports given to school management play important roles in ensuring the quality of the educational experience for learners. This means that the actors involved include the NCCA, State Examinations Commission, the Teaching Council, the school support services including the PDST and the National Induction Programme for Teachers (NIPT), providers of initial and continuing education for teachers, my own Department's Schools Division, as well as management authorities, teacher unions and bodies representing parents and students. However, tonight I will concentrate primarily on the roles of two actors – that of my own organisation, the Inspectorate and its work in external quality assurance, and on the role of the school itself.

An emphasis on the quality of outcomes – why now?

I think that it is fair to say that at this juncture in the history of our educational system, we are increasingly concerned with the quality of the learning in which young people are engaged in schools and centres for education. Of course, it would be simplistic to suggest that it is *only* this generation that has become concerned with the quality of children's learning – practically every educationalist of note in the past and many initiatives in education have sought to improve children's learning. But I think that it is true to say that at this moment, the professionals who work in the Irish educational system – be they teachers, school leaders, administrators, managers, inspectors, policy makers or politicians – feel that their work is subject to greater and more intense scrutiny than ever before.

Ireland is not alone in having this heightened level of public interest in the quality of educational outcomes. I don't propose tonight to examine in comprehensive detail why there should be this concentration on the quality of the learning achieved by students in educational systems. However, I think it is helpful if we first have some regard to a few of the reasons why this issue of quality in the school system occupies so much of the discourse about education at present.

An opportune time for focus on quality

One simple interpretation may be that, irrespective of other factors, we would still have focussed on the quality of the Irish education system at this juncture simply because we now have the opportunity to do so. The focus of Irish educational policy in the second half of the 20th century (and particularly in the last quarter of that century) was on the expansion

of provision to address the under-developed areas of our educational system, to extend equality of opportunity, and to release the talents of all of our young people. I think it's fair to say that while we certainly have more to do regarding the provision of education in Ireland, and particularly in certain areas such as early childhood education, much of the "heavy lifting" in terms of provision is in place at primary and secondary levels. So, since the late 1990s, like other developed systems, we have the opportunity to concentrate on the quality and effectiveness of that provision: we have turned naturally to asking ourselves whether our efforts have achieved the objectives we desired, particularly regarding equality of opportunity and the effectiveness of interventions to address educational disadvantage. We have been able to move from a focus on inputs and supply to a focus on outcomes and achievement.

The professionalisation of teaching

A second, and perhaps more significant factor, that has encouraged the preoccupation with quality in schools is the growing professionalisation of teaching. Recent decades have seen an increasing willingness of teachers and school leaders to set professional standards, to lead their own professional development and to seek to improve the educational experience for learners. Much of the most constructive criticism of schooling and education has come from teachers themselves including the many teachers who have engaged in extensive professional development and in third-level research in institutions such as the Education Department of this university. All of this is healthy and bodes well for the future of Irish education.

A focus on quality in human services

There are however, other pressures at work that have reinforced our concentration on the quality of the outcomes achieved by the educational system. In many developed countries the success of school systems and educational policies in delivering desirable educational outcomes has become a matter of considerable debate and concern, not only within professional educational communities but also in political fora and among the general public. Ireland is no different in this regard.

It is also worth noting that education is not the only human service which is being subjected to this scrutiny. Many of the services that we would have traditionally spoken of as "public services" and which are now being referred to in at least some of the academic literature as "human services" are being subjected to greater degrees of public examination and accountability. This scrutiny is evident not only in the field of education but also in areas such as health care, policing and a range of

services that would have been delivered traditionally by central or local government or their agencies.

The drive for value for money

A considerable degree of the impetus for this scrutiny is undoubtedly to do with the cost of these public or human services, and the need for governments to ensure that they obtain “value for money” in the delivery and effectiveness of the services that are funded from the public purse. This is understandable when Ireland’s current expenditure in education constitutes 17% of overall government gross spending (a one percentage increase on 2011) and when the education sector employs almost one third of all Irish public servants.¹ A related development in this regard has been the efforts made in recent decades to understand and improve the management of public bodies and services and to provide “more customer-focussed” services for citizens.²

Market mechanisms and school autonomy

In some countries, ideological and political debates have also been important drivers of change: for some, the drive for greater accountability in human services has been linked with a preference for state involvement in the delivery of human services to occur only where absolutely necessary. In this scenario, markets are seen as being capable of providing such services much more efficiently and effectively than the state or its agencies. These market mechanisms, including initiatives such as “voucher schemes” and “charter” or “free schools” have given rise to intense debates in political and educational circles. Most reviews of research literature in this area have concluded that the effects of market mechanisms in education are small, if they are found at all.³ However, one side-effect of this interest in market mechanisms has been to heighten interest in measuring educational outcomes. It has been argued that greater school autonomy has to be balanced by greater accountability, and hence, it is asserted, that these systems have a greater focus on outcomes for learners.

¹ Ireland’s provision for gross voted current expenditure in education for 2012 is €8.24 billion, equivalent to 17% of overall government gross spending (a one percentage increase on 2011). Education accounts for the third highest element of current expenditure in Ireland, after health and social protection, and the education sector employs almost one third of all Irish public servants. In addition, the state will invest €430 million in capital expenditure in the education sector in 2012.

² See for example, the reports on the work of government departments arising from the Organisational Review Programme originally undertaken by the Department of the Taoiseach and currently undertaken by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. The report on the Department of Education and Skills is included in ORP, *Third Report of the Organisational Review Programme*, (Dublin, Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, 2011).

³ Sietske Waslander, Cissy Pater and Maartje van der Weide, *Markets in Education: An Analytical Review of Empirical Research on Market Mechanisms in Education – Education Working Paper No. 52*, (Paris, OECD, 2010).

I see little evidence in the Irish school system of such ideologically-driven demands for less state involvement in educational provision. Perhaps this is the case because the Irish school system has a relatively low level of direct state involvement in the management of schools when compared to systems in many other countries. However, arguments *have* been advanced in favour of granting greater autonomy to schools over certain aspects of their work and the current *Programme for Government* includes this as a policy objective. Exactly what is meant by “greater school autonomy” varies from country to country and the detail of such developments has yet to be fully articulated in the Irish context.⁴ However, what is inevitable, is that any moves to grant greater autonomy and decision-making powers to schools is likely to have to be balanced by greater public scrutiny of the work of school leaders, teachers, boards of management and school patrons.

Globalisation and international comparisons

A further factor that has undoubtedly focussed a spotlight on the quality of the Irish educational system has been the globalisation of the world economy and the increasing attention paid to studies that compare educational achievement across many countries. In the race to attract “high-end” or “knowledge-based” global investment, the quality of our education system and the capabilities of our young people are among the critical factors considered by investors when selecting where to locate businesses.

All of this means that international comparisons of educational achievement have attracted more and more attention. It is not surprising that the most influential (and indeed the most generously funded surveys) are those of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development. The most well known in the school system is, of course, the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) but the OECD and its Centre for Educational Research and Innovation, sometimes in partnership with the EU Commission and EU bodies, conduct an increasing range of other surveys.⁵ A detailed discussion of these surveys and studies is beyond the limitations of this paper; it is

⁴ *Programme for Government: Fine Gael-Labour, 2011*, (Dublin, Government Publications, 2011), p.9. The *Programme* refers to boards of management and principals being given greater flexibility to allocate and manage staff, as well as greater responsibility for the administration of capital spending and the coordination of support services.

⁵ Surveys for which the OECD and its Centre for Educational Research and Innovation are responsible currently include studies concerning issues such as teacher education and behaviour, adult education, higher and third-level education, training and skills development in the education and work systems, the use of evaluation and assessment in educational systems, and how education systems can best support innovation and creativity. See www.oecd.org

sufficient, here, to note that the emphasis placed on the measurement of student achievement as an indicator of the effectiveness of school systems is an underlying assumption of studies such as PISA. This assumption has had a powerful back-wash effect on many educational systems, including our own.

Partly because PISA claims to measure educational achievement in what it terms the key competences of reading literacy, mathematical literacy and scientific literacy across countries irrespective of curriculum content, partly because of its ranking of student performance in participating countries, and partly because of the sheer scale of the project, PISA has come to dominate discussions about the outcomes achieved by school systems. Less attention is paid in Ireland to TIMSS and PIRLS, studies also concerned with reading, mathematics and science overseen by the IAE, in which Ireland participated initially but then abandoned, and which we have rejoined at primary level last year.⁶

An aside about PISA

I hope you will forgive me if I make an aside at this point about PISA and the Irish context. There is no doubt that PISA and other international comparisons provoke much debate among educationalists. Critics of PISA argue that the desired outcomes of education are much broader than the reductionist tendency of PISA (as they see it) to value only reading, mathematics and scientific understanding; advocates of PISA, on the other hand, point out that these skills are, after all, basic requirements for participation in a modern society and economy.

It is unfortunate, in my view, that PISA's outcomes are so readily oversimplified into league tables of countries which dominate reporting of the tests in much of the media. However, I welcome the focus that the outcomes of PISA have brought to the public discourse on Irish education. We are fortunate in Ireland that we have three broadsheet newspapers and a number of broadcast media outlets that paid detailed attention to the outcomes of the 2009 PISA results for Ireland. Such attention and reporting, if carried out responsibly, can be beneficial for the education system.

I believe that the evidence shows that falls in the literacy and mathematical achievements of Irish 15-year-olds between 2000 and 2009, as reported in the 2009 cycle of PISA, reflected a probable and worrying

⁶ PIRLS is the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study and TIMSS is the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study. Both are overseen by the IEA (the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement) based at Boston College.

decline in these skills among students. I have no interest in seeking to “explain away” the declines in standards of achievement on the tests. More importantly, I welcome the fact that the 2009 results helped to shake us out of a sense of complacency about standards in Irish schools and provided strong arguments for continued investment in education. There is no doubt too, that the results and the reporting of them, made it easier or more acceptable to introduce certain policy initiatives in the context of the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy.⁷

But I also believe that each one of us in the educational system and the education media has a duty to disentangle the complex, qualified and sometimes contradictory data that PISA presents so as to understand as fully as possible what PISA may be telling us. Just as importantly, we have a responsibility to understand that PISA, like any human construct, is based on a set of assumptions and imperfect methodologies. We need to appreciate the limitations of PISA findings and treat them as an important element, but not the sole determinant of policy initiatives.

As a country and educational system, we paid little attention to the underlying assumptions and limitations of PISA when the outcomes portrayed Ireland as having a highly effective school system. In the wake of the 2009 PISA results, we have gone to considerable lengths to understand PISA more fully and to communicate the significance of what PISA is telling us as well as the limitations of its methodologies and reporting. Perhaps we should have done more of this all along, but I cannot accept the proposition that Irish educational researchers – or indeed any of us with a serious responsibility for the development of the Irish educational system – should unquestioningly accept superficial interpretations of PISA data. Indeed, I believe that precisely because PISA is such a valuable and important tool, we have a duty as OECD members to contribute as fully as possible to questioning and improving its underlying constructs and methodologies. In this regard, I hope that much greater attention will be paid in the media generally to the detailed work undertaken by researchers such as those at the Educational Research Centre in Drumcondra, some of it in conjunction with Statistics Canada, in the wake of the 2009 findings.⁸

⁷ Department of Education and Skills, *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life: The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People, 2011-2020*, (Dublin, DES, 2011).

⁸ Rachel Perkins, Jude Cosgrove, Gráinne Moran and Gerry Shiel, *PISA 2009: Results for Ireland and Changes since 2000*, (Dublin, ERC, 2012).

A combination of factors

To return to my main topic – the reasons why we have a current focus on quality in our school system: I don't wish to suggest that the factors that I have listed above – the stage of development of our school system, the concern to ensure equity in the system, the desire for value for money, a move to school autonomy, and the impact of international comparisons – is a definitive list of the reasons why we are now focussed on the quality of our school system. I am sure that many of you could suggest further factors. However, I believe these factors are among those that are shaping the ways in which quality assurance of schools has and is developing.

Let me turn now to considering those developments.

A framework to consider the quality assurance of schools

A recent paper from the National Economic and Social Council about the quality of human services in Ireland⁹ summarises a considerable body of research concerning the approaches that are used to enforce or assure quality in service provision. It describes a possible continuum of approaches ranging from regulation and control at one end to complete self-regulation at the other. It also describes an approach to quality assurance which it terms “smart regulation” or “responsive regulation” in which elements of both regulation and self-regulation are combined in order to encourage and embed improvement in the delivery of services. Indeed, I should note here that NESC will shortly publish a detailed paper on how quality assurance in the Irish education system might be analysed using this “smart regulation” model.¹⁰ I believe that this will be a very useful study, encompassing as it does the wide range of actors in the education system that I mentioned at the outset of this paper.

For the purposes of this paper, I want to consider where quality assurance of Irish schools, through external inspection and school-based self-evaluation, might fit on the continuum between regulation and self-regulation and how the balance between the two has altered and may continue to develop. This will be the main focus of the remainder of this paper.

⁹ NESC, *Quality and Standards in Human Services in Ireland: Overview of Concepts and Practice*, (Dublin, NESC, 2011).

¹⁰ NESC, *Quality and Standards in Human Services in Ireland – The School System in Ireland* (forthcoming, 2012).

Quality assurance and the Education Act 1998

I will argue that the Education Act of 1998 clearly envisaged the use of both strong external regulation by means of the Inspectorate, and effective internal self-regulation within schools in order to ensure the quality of learning for students. I hope to show that while there have been considerable successes in implementing elements of the 1998 Act, there is still a considerable challenge to be met if the Irish school system is to have a truly effective quality assurance process based on the best practice principles of “responsive regulation.” Through examining the challenge that faces us, I hope to describe some of the most recent developments that have taken place and what I believe will be the major trends that lie ahead in the development of external inspection, school-based self-evaluation and quality assurance.

The Inspectorate and external quality assurance in the 1998 Act

The Education Act of 1998 provided certainty and a clarity of role for the Inspectorate. The Inspectorate had experienced a period of considerable uncertainty about its role in the 1970s and 1980s.¹¹ Section 13 of the Education 1998 Act gave the Inspectorate both evaluative and advisory roles in schools, though the former was probably more strongly articulated. On our continuum, we can see the 1998 Act as placing the Inspectorate somewhat towards the regulation and external quality assurance end of the quality assurance spectrum. The Act made clear that evaluation and reporting on schools was to be a major part of the Inspectorate’s work; the Inspectorate was provided with the powers to inspect “on the initiative of the Inspectorate”; and a duty was placed on school staff and boards of management to grant “every reasonable facility” to inspectors in the course of their work.¹²

During the decade following the passing of the 1998 Act, much of the Inspectorate’s effort went into realising the evaluative and regulatory aspects of its role. Tasks such as the running of the State examinations and areas of work such as advising on special needs allocations to individual pupils and operating a psychological service were passed to new organisations in the State Examinations Commission, the National Council for Special Education and the National Educational

¹¹ For a comprehensive account of the development of the Irish Inspectorate, see John Coolahan and Patrick F O’Donovan, *A History of the Ireland’s School Inspectorate, 1831-2008*, (Dublin, Four Courts Press, 2009).

¹² Education Act, 1998, section 13 generally; see especially, section 13(3) and section 13(7).

Psychological Service.¹³ Under Eamon Stack as Chief Inspector, an Inspectorate, enlarged during the years of economic prosperity from just over 120 staff in 1997 to over 160 at its peak exactly a decade later, was enabled to develop and implement inspection models that could be used to evaluate and report on the work of schools in a consistent and professional manner.

A number of significant achievements were realised.

Firstly, the development and implementation of inspection models – whole school evaluation at primary and post-primary level, complemented by subject inspection at post-primary level – certainly established external inspection as a valuable and accepted part of the education landscape, despite initial and strong resistance from some of the education partners.

Secondly, the Inspectorate demonstrated that external evaluation could be developed and carried out in a spirit of genuine professional collaboration. Collaboration was realised between school communities and inspectors at school level – not an inconsiderable achievement at second level in particular, where there had been no extensive tradition of inspectors visiting schools for many years. Although many schools feared that inspectors would not be sensitive to school context, in practice very few complaints ever arose about the extent to which inspectors’ judgements had failed in this regard. Good working relationships were also established at national level between the Inspectorate and bodies representing management, teachers, school leaders, parents and students. The growing importance attached to social partnership generally, and in the education sector particularly, and the emergence of new nationally organised bodies representing parents and school principals, certainly assisted in the development of this collaborative approach.

Thirdly, within the Inspectorate, a great deal of effort was expended on enabling inspectors to carry out their work in a thoroughly professional way: a *Code of Professional Practice* and an appeals mechanism were developed and published.¹⁴ Extensive professional development and the provision of standardised criteria and evaluation tools (from the Inspectorate’s newly-established Evaluation Support and Research Unit) were used to ensure common understandings among inspectors of up-to-

¹³ See Coolahan and O’Donovan, *A History of the Ireland’s School Inspectorate, 1831-2008*.

¹⁴ Inspectorate, *Professional Code of Practice on Evaluation and Reporting for the Inspectorate*, (Dublin, DES, nd.) and Inspectorate, *Procedure for Review of Inspections on Schools and Teachers under Section 13(9) of the Education Act, 1998*, (Dublin, DES, revised edition, 2006).

date good practice in teaching and learning and a consistency of approach in evaluation and reporting. This work drew on findings from school effectiveness and school improvement research. It took cognisance of the culture and needs of the Irish school system but it also reflected best international practice as the Inspectorate established growing international linkages within the European-wide Standing International Conference of Central and General Inspectorates of Education (SICI). The Inspectorate also made public its inspection approaches in booklets describing its inspection models.

Fourthly, the Inspectorate was enabled to publish the outcomes of inspections to the wider public from 2006 when statutory regulations were put in place to facilitate the publication of school inspection reports.¹⁵ Despite understandable anxieties among teachers and school management, the publication project was successful and the routine publication of school inspection reports is now an accepted part of the system.

Self-evaluation of schools in the 1998 Act

If I turn to the self-evaluation or self-regulation end of the spectrum, we can see that this, too, was provided for in the Education Act of 1998. The Act clearly placed the primary responsibility for the quality of the education provided to students on the school's board of management¹⁶ and it envisaged that the school principal would have a major role in leading good practice and in monitoring the achievements of students in the school.¹⁷ A separate section of the Act, section 20, also provided that the board of management should “establish procedures for informing the parents and students in the school of matters relating to the operation and performance of the school” and that these procedures could include “the publication...of a report on the operation and performance of the school in any school year.”¹⁸ This reporting was envisaged as arising from the progress that the school would make in developing and implementing a school plan, as required under section 21 of the Act. Finally, I should note that section 24 of the Education Act provided for procedures whereby boards of management as employers could deal with any unsatisfactory performance from teachers.

¹⁵ Inspectorate, *Publication of School Inspection Reports – Guidelines*, (Dublin, DES, 2006) and *Education Act 1998 (Publication of Inspection Reports on Schools and Centres for Education) Regulations 2006* (Dublin, Oireachtas, 2006).

¹⁶ Education Act, 1998, section 15

¹⁷ Education Act, 1998, section 22

¹⁸ Education Act, 1998, section 20

Considerable resources were invested in upskilling school leaders and teachers in school development planning in the period following the passing of the Education Act. Two dedicated support services were established in 1999 and they worked for a number of years with schools and provided a range of publications and support materials.¹⁹ Between 2001 and 2003, Ireland was also a participant in a major international project on school self-evaluation, funded by the EU Commission and organised under the auspices of SICI.²⁰

It is certainly true that school planning processes became embedded in schools and much greater levels of professional collaboration were achieved in schools. This was evident in the reports of inspectors, where one can trace a significant shift in practice over time: by the end of the “noughties” collaborative planning regarding curricular provision and the development of school policies on a wide range of issues such as student behaviour, anti-bullying initiatives, homework, and parent-school linkages became commonplace. Realising and introducing procedures to enable boards of management to deal with unsatisfactory teaching took much longer to achieve, but procedures were introduced in late 2009 and are now operational.²¹

But effective “smart regulation” is not yet realised

Yet despite these achievements in both the areas of external inspection and school self-evaluation, there is still a considerable amount of work to be done if we are to achieve an effective quality assurance system for Irish schools. Such a system, if it is to conform to the ideals of “smart regulation” or “responsive regulation” must use a judicious combination of robust self-evaluation and external school inspection to assure quality and promote improvement in individual schools. In the Inspectorate’s three-year work-programme, set out in 2010 in a document entitled *Our Purpose, Our Plan, 2011-13*, we envisaged that school self-evaluation and external inspection should be complementary and mutually reinforcing processes, both focussed primarily on improving practice in

¹⁹ See for example, DES, *School Development Planning Initiative Progress Report 2002*, (Dublin, DES, 2002).

²⁰ SICI, *Effective School Self-Evaluation Project (ESSE Project)*, (Edinburgh, SICI, 2003).

²¹ DES, *Circular 59/09: Revised procedures in relation to professional competence issues and general disciplinary matters in VECs* (Dublin, DES, 2009) and DES, *Circular 60/09 Revised procedures in relation to professional competence issues and general disciplinary matters in primary/post primary schools*, (Dublin, DES, 2009).

teaching and on the learning outcomes achieved by students. More recently and more significantly, the *Programme for Government* confirmed that a balanced development of external inspection and high-quality school self-evaluation would form key elements of the government's education policy. The developments and forthcoming trends that I will sketch out in the remainder of this talk deal mainly with realising this ideal.

These developments include:

- A wider range of efficient inspection models
- Intelligent planning of the inspection programme
- Defining and articulating standards for the school system
- Using of data to inform school evaluation and improvement
- Using data for system-level monitoring and improvement
- Reforming the rules and regulations governing schools
- Embedding a culture of robust self-review and professional accountability in schools and school communities
- The need for both schools and the Inspectorate to utilise strong feedback loops about their own performances and impact
- Dealing with teacher appraisal
- Follow-up to inspections and dealing with school under-performance.

A wider range of efficient inspection models

External inspection of any human service, including schools, requires adequate but carefully planned coverage and evaluation of service provision and providers. While the whole-school evaluation (WSE) and subject inspection models established in the decade after 1998 established the practice of external inspection within schools, the models proved incapable of delivering adequate inspection coverage across the school system, even with the staffing levels available to the Inspectorate prior to the contraction of public service employment.²² The models were children of their time: they had been developed in a highly collaborative manner (in order to secure their acceptance), they incorporated included many non-essential features, and they proved to be far too elaborate and time-consuming. They also suggested that evaluations were only valid

²² The overall staffing of the Inspectorate fell from 166 inspectors at the end of 2007 to 127 inspectors at 31 December 2011 and to 116 at 28 February 2012. This fall in numbers has been due almost entirely to the introduction of the moratorium on recruitment and promotions in the civil service introduced in as part of government-wide efforts to cut the numbers of public sector numbers. A recruitment process to replace some inspectors is currently underway.

where every element of the work of the school was examined and reported upon in exhaustive detail. They left little flexibility to inspection teams to judge what was, and was not, likely to be important, and they resulted in overly long and overly complex reports. Consequently, the Inspectorate could not deliver sufficiently frequent inspections nor could it hope to produce published reports on schools with sufficient regularity.

It is for this reason that a major thrust of the work of the Inspectorate since 2010 has been on radically altering the way in which external inspections are carried out so as to improve inspection coverage. This has involved, firstly, the development of a broad range of inspection models, ranging from short unannounced inspections, through longer more detailed evaluations and targeted thematic inspection visits, to very detailed and intense inspections. Shorter and more efficient models have also been developed for inspections of alternative education provision in settings such as Youthreach centres and for use in schools attached to High Support Units and Special Care Units. In addition, the focus of all inspection models has been placed on just two critical aspects of the work of schools – the effectiveness of school leadership and management, and the quality of teaching and learning. Much of the time-consuming examination of documentation has been eliminated and a much greater proportion of inspectors' time in the school is spent on the observation of practice and in the provision of feedback to teachers. Moreover, the proportion of inspectors' total time spent on in-school inspection activities has increased while time spent on writing and reporting has declined.

For example, at primary level, a school might experience an incidental (unannounced inspection) which is conducted in one day, or a targeted DEIS inspection if it is in the DEIS scheme, or a longer and more intense whole-school evaluation. At present, we are also trialling a shorter form of WSE for primary schools, which will provide a fourth inspection approach at this level. At post-primary level, we now have available to us incidental unannounced inspections; subject inspections which look at the work of individual subject departments; a relatively short and intense model of whole-school evaluation called WSE-MLL (Management, Leadership and Learning), which incorporates a cross-curricular examination of teaching and learning; and full-scale whole-school evaluation.

These reforms, and the considerable changes in work-practices which have been introduced among inspectors, have enabled the Inspectorate to maintain or improve levels of inspection activity in schools during 2011

despite the reductions in staffing which have occurred under the public sector moratorium. For example: the total number of inspections in 2011 was 3,783. This was considerably more than the number achieved in 2010, despite a considerable reduction in staff. The number of whole-school type evaluations completed in primary and post-primary schools has been increased from just over 300 in 2009 to 389 in 2011. The use of unannounced inspections has grown in the primary sector and the model has been mainstreamed in the post-primary sector. The overall effect has been that we are now able to say that in 2011, in addition to the inspection of probationary teachers, we carried out some form of inspection in over one-sixth of primary schools and in over 600 of the 740 post-primary schools in the country.

Intelligent planning of the inspection programme

Intelligent deployment of these various external inspection models is also critical in providing adequate external quality assurance for the school system. Having a range of inspection approaches means that short inspection models, such as the unannounced inspections, can be used to scan the system for potential risks to students' learning.

Better use of information from these "scanning" inspections can be combined with other data available to the Inspectorate to plan for the deployment of other, more time-consuming inspection models. We have abandoned the traditional cyclical approach to planning the inspection programme and instead, we use a range of criteria to decide where inspections should take place. These criteria include information from previous inspections, from State Examinations and from the Schools Division of the Department, in addition to consideration of the length of time since the previous inspection. The inspection programme also has regard to the mix of schools covered – urban/rural, school type (voluntary secondary/community-comprehensive, VEC-managed) and language of instruction (English-medium and Irish-medium). We continue to use the more intensive inspection models in all types of schools – both those where we have concerns and those where we believe practice will be very good or excellent – for a number of reasons, not least because we believe inspectors need to evaluate very good practice as well as poorer practice regularly. However, including an element of "risk-analysis" in our selection of schools for inspection enables us to concentrate inspection resources where external evaluation may have most impact.

Defining and articulating standards for the school system

A responsive regulatory system cannot operate effectively unless everyone involved is very clear about the standards against which the service is to be judged. This means that if we are to use a combination of external inspection and school self-evaluation, we must articulate a clear set of standards against which the work and outputs of schools can be judged. This has only partly been achieved in the case of the evaluation of schools.

Within the Inspectorate, a very detailed set of criteria were developed covering the various aspects of the school to be evaluated by inspectors during whole-school evaluations and other inspections. These criteria have formed the basis of inspectors' professional development and they continue to be a major contributor in helping to ensure consistency among inspection teams.

Clearly, if we are to expect schools to conduct effective self-evaluation of their work, the staffs and boards of schools need to have access to similar criteria. An attempt was made to publish these criteria in *Looking at Our School – An Aid to Self-Evaluation in Primary Schools* and *Looking at Our School – An Aid to Self-Evaluation in Post-primary Schools* in 2003.²³

The pre-publication drafts of these documents suggested that schools would use a four point continuum to evaluate their practice – “Significant strengths/More strengths than weaknesses/More weaknesses than strengths/Significant weaknesses”. The draft documents provided descriptors about each aspect of the schools work, elaborated at the level of “Significant strengths” and “More weaknesses than strengths”. However, when the draft documents were issued for consultation among some of the education partners, they were strongly criticised and the decision was taken to remove the detailed descriptors and to publish the guides with only the headings included.

Perhaps this was a fortunate turn of events as *Looking at Our School*, like whole-school evaluation on which it was based, attempted to address every aspect of the school's activity. It is likely that the full set of criteria would have been unwieldy and overwhelming for schools. However, I

²³ Inspectorate, *Looking at Our School: A Aid to Self-Evaluation in Primary Schools*, (Dublin, DES, 2003) and Inspectorate, *Looking at Our School: An Aid to Self-Evaluation in Second-Level Schools*, (Dublin, DES, 2003).

believe that the lack of detailed criteria, and therefore of clear standards, limited the usefulness of the guide as a support for school self-evaluation.

Equally significant was the omission from *Looking at Our School* of any detailed guidance on how to use the skeleton standards that remained or how best to conduct the self-evaluation process. The document made almost no reference to the very significant cultural changes needed if robust self-evaluation was to be established, nor did it include any of the tools that could have been used to collect evidence about school practice.

To date, robust self-evaluation that examines the quality of learning outcomes and the quality of teachers' practice in classrooms is relatively rare in Irish schools. The lack of clearly articulated criteria or standards for self-evaluation and the lack of practical guidance on how to conduct self-evaluation may partly explain why robust self-evaluation did not become established in Irish schools, despite extensive support for and engagement in school development planning.

The weakness of self-evaluation in the schools system impacted directly on the ability and willingness of the Inspectorate to rely on the outcomes of school self-evaluation as a significant evidence base for external inspection judgements. While the Inspectorate continued to encourage schools to engage in school self-evaluation and while inspection reports commented regularly upon the quality of school planning, the Inspectorate did not alter its inspection models to take account of the outcomes of school self-evaluation.

The newly published drafts of *School Self-Evaluation Guidelines* for primary and post-primary schools are an attempt to address the lacunae in *Looking at Our School*. The drafts have been published for use in a trial now underway in a number of schools under the auspices of the Inspectorate. The drafts contain standards for teaching and learning presented as "evaluation criteria" and as "quality statements". These alternative presentations have been included to aid teachers and school staffs to understand the standards as fully as possible. To date, these standards have been included only for the level "Significant strengths" but work is underway to provide an elaboration of the standards at the level "More weaknesses than strengths" so as to help schools to make realistic and accurate judgements about the quality of their practice and to identify areas of activity that require improvement. In addition, the draft *Guidelines* include advice on how self-evaluation may be undertaken and a set of simple tools that can be used to collect evidence about the work of the school.

The Literacy and Numeracy Strategy signalled that the Minister would ask the NCCA to re-casting curricula in terms of learning outcomes and provide exemplars illustrating what these outcomes mean in terms of students' work. I believe such curricula and materials will have the potential to provide a further rich source of articulated standards by which schools could evaluate their work and performance.

Using data to inform school evaluation and improvement

The Irish school system has considerable work to do to improve the information that we have available to us regarding the effectiveness of individual schools and the system more generally. The most effective educational systems have good levels of quantitative and qualitative data to monitor student progression and achievement and to monitor the effectiveness of schools.

One aspect of this information gap concerns student learning. When this is mentioned, there is an understandable fear that what we really mean here is student testing on a limited number of skills such as literacy, numeracy and perhaps scientific understanding. This generates concerns that an over-reliance on such testing will restrict the learning experience for students in a damaging way. I share these concerns – the purpose of the educational system is to foster a broad range of learning, to enable each learner to develop their particular strengths, and to equip them with the skills and attitudes that they need to live fully as citizens in their local, national and global communities.

That is why we need a balanced and comprehensive means to evaluate and monitor the achievement of students at school level. Evaluations of practice in schools, conducted by experienced inspectors who can make context-sensitive judgements about the work of the school are a rich source of meaningful information about schools. In parallel with the development of new inspection models, much work has been done on improving how we collect such data and analyse it for national reports such as that on the teaching of reading and mathematics in primary schools published in 2010²⁴ or those on the implementation of planning

²⁴ Inspectorate, *Incidental Inspection Findings 2010: A Report on the Teaching and Learning of English and Mathematics in Primary Schools*, (Dublin, DES, 2010)

and target setting in DEIS schools published a few months ago.²⁵ Effective self-evaluation could provide schools with opportunities to examine, analyse and present qualitative information on their work in not dissimilar ways.

We also need to draw assessment information from a range of sources. Terminal state examinations, for example, while useful, cannot give us long-term comparable data on student learning, simply because the examination must change each year. Standardised tests of reading and mathematics, and perhaps of other skills, can provide restricted but useful information about students' achievement. Properly analysed by teachers at school level, they can be used to identify weaknesses in students' learning and to help in designing the next appropriate learning steps for students.

However, we know that such assessments have not been used to best effect in Irish schools and hence Minister Quinn's decision to make the administration and reporting of such tests mandatory in Irish primary schools from 2012 and from 2014 in post-primary schools. Of course, in themselves, standardised tests cannot provide adequate data on student achievement. Teacher-administered, continuous assessment can provide a further vital component in assessing the broad range of skills that students are developing. This practice is already well embedded in primary schools and in third-level education. The proposals of the NCCA concerning an element of school-based assessment at junior cycle level is to be welcomed, therefore, for the opportunities that it affords for the recognition of broader aspects of learning.

The challenge for inspection and for self-evaluation is to ensure that accurate and meaningful information about student achievement is examined critically during evaluations and that judgements about the effectiveness of the school's teaching and learning are based on such hard evidence. Currently, at primary level, many schools are beginning to use standardised test results as one element of their evaluations and where this is available, inspectors are also able to draw on this data. At post-primary level, the data available are generally limited to the outcomes from the State examinations. The degree to which this is interrogated fully by schools varies considerably at present. Its use and the use of standardised test results and other assessment information should be a major area of development over the next few years, and already the PDST

²⁵ Inspectorate, *An Evaluation of Planning Processes in DEIS Primary Schools*, (Dublin, DES, 2011) and Inspectorate, *An Evaluation of Planning Processes in DEIS Post-Primary Schools*, (Dublin, DES, 2011).

has included the use of assessment data as an element of the continuing professional development provided to school principals.

Using data for system-level monitoring and improvement

I am concentrating in this paper on school level inspection and self-evaluation, but I should note here that just as we need better data at individual school level, we also need better data at system level. One of the clear weaknesses in the Irish school system that was exposed in the aftermath of PISA 2009 was our comparative lack of data on a system-wide basis regarding the achievements of students and the performance of schools.

More frequent reporting of external inspection findings through greater inspection coverage combined with the availability of self-evaluation outcomes among the members of the school community could certainly help to address much of the qualitative information gap about school performance. National analysis of some assessment data from schools also has the potential to allow identification of schools where unexpectedly high or unexpectedly low levels of student performance occur and where further analysis is merited. This is why the National Literacy Strategy incorporates the collection of national assessment data for the first time. Unfortunately, we will be doing this without the infrastructure of a national individual pupil database at primary level.

Inevitably, any discussion of achievement data leads us to the question of school league tables and whether the release of test or examination data to allow such tables to be compiled should be allowed. It is undeniably true that there has been an increased demand in many countries for information about school performance, partly to supply the needs of parents and also because there is a belief that measuring and publicising student outcomes on a comparative basis will lead schools to focus on taking the action necessary to improve their relative performance. Media interests in many countries, particularly in “Anglo-Saxon” countries, have been strong advocates for the publication of test or examination results; in many such countries, newspapers produce school league tables using the data and these have proved popular and commercially very lucrative.

Although there is an assumption that increased accountability and transparency will help drive improvement, the experience of many countries shows that there are a number of challenges in striking the right balance between providing useful information and ensuring that

evaluation information is not misinterpreted. Published student outcomes often fail to capture the full spectrum of student learning objectives and tend to be more reflective of the socio-economic background of students in a school rather than the impact of teaching in the school. Adjusting test results for socio-economic factors is a disputed science and in any case, it is a most expensive process – one we could certainly not afford readily at present. There are also real risks of a possible narrowing effect on the curriculum and wider achievement, and there is some evidence that publishing league tables widens disparities already present in education systems. Indeed, some of the most successful education systems, such as Finland and New Zealand, have either chosen not to use league tables of performance or have moved away from doing so. Ultimately, the decision to publish or not publish league tables tends to be a political one, and when launching the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy, Minister Quinn made clear that he had no interest in publishing school league tables.

What can be more useful at system level (and considerably less expensive than national, context-adjusted school league tables) is the use of sample-based, periodic assessments of student achievement. The National Assessment of Reading and Mathematics conducted by the Educational Research Centre is one such assessment which provides accurate and detailed information on changes in student achievement. For the last round of these assessments in 2009, a decision was made to standardise the testing for both subjects at the level of fourth and sixth classes and the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy committed us to extending the use of these assessments to second-year students in post-primary schools in due course. Such sample-based assessments could also be extended to other curricular areas at both primary and post-primary level, but there are no plans to do so at this time. However, our continued participation in PISA at post-primary level and our re-joining of TIMMS and PIRLS at primary level will provide system-wide and internationally comparative data on student achievement in reading, mathematics and science which will be invaluable in monitoring general standards in Irish schools.

Reforming the rules and regulations that govern schools

If a regulatory system is to function properly, then having clear and accessible statements of the rules, regulations and requirements is essential. I am saying nothing new when I note that this situation does not pertain in the Irish school system and I will not labour the point. The need for reform in this matter is well-recognised by many within the

Department who regret that for many years it has not been possible to make adequate resources available for this issue to be tackled.

Re-writing the existing sets of rules and regulations, as has sometimes been suggested, is not realistic. Instead, it is probably more practical to tackle major themes or areas one-by-one, to prepare comprehensive, up-to-date and simplified requirements, and to bring these into force in a staged way. This would mean that over time, the current sets of rules, circulars and regulations could be replaced by sets of regulations, probably issued under section 33 of the Education Act. The draft arrangements to regulate enrolment in schools is, I believe, an excellent example of how this approach could work and I know that many of you will be familiar with the process involved. The Education Act of 1998 rendered redundant several rules and regulations. The replacement of the many pieces of VEC-related legislation by one comprehensive Education and Training Boards Act will be a further example of legislative rationalisation.

Certainly, clearer articulation of the responsibilities of schools and the other actors in the school system can only be beneficial for everyone involved. It could enable schools to assure themselves and self-declare to their communities and the public that they were in compliance with all regulatory requirements and it would make easier the work of inspectors who must verify such compliance. The inclusion of a checklist of current major regulations and rules as part of the *School Self-Evaluation Guidelines* is intended to facilitate such self-reporting and inspection.

Embedding a culture of robust self-review and professional accountability in schools and school communities

I have already alluded to the lack of robust self-review in Irish schools. I believe that the evidence from many countries shows that the adoption of such review practices can have very beneficial effects on the quality of teaching and learning in schools. There is no doubt that if the school principal and other school leaders succeed in getting teachers to look at their own practice and the outcomes achieved by students in a critical and professional way, then a conversation on how practice and learning can be improved will flow naturally in the vast majority of cases. This can be a powerful agent for improvement.

The *Programme for Government* and the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy set out ambitious targets for the introduction of self-

evaluation. Already self-evaluation materials are in development and trial use in a small number of primary and post-primary schools. The Inspectorate is supporting these schools directly and has established a unit with specific responsibility for promoting school self-evaluation. It is planned to amend the materials at the end of this school year and to introduce their use within the wider system in the next school year. To support this development, the PDST will be providing seminars for school leaders and key staff and over the course of the next two years the Inspectorate will be devoting a considerable part of its inspection resources to conducting advisory visits to individual schools in order to assist them in engaging with self-evaluation. We believe that using a proportion of inspection resources in this manner, and reducing somewhat the normal inspection activity in schools for a short period is justified because of the potential benefits that could accrue to school improvement and overall regulation of the school system.

We face a considerable challenge in introducing school self-evaluation in the current context of reduced human and other resources within schools. We also know that it demands considerable leadership skills from principals and senior staff, and that it cannot work effectively unless it examines the efficacy of teachers' practice. It will require the school to be open to collecting and analysing evidence from sources such as student assessment, parental questionnaires, student surveys and peer observations among teachers. All of these will present challenges for school management, principals and teachers but if introduced gradually and carefully, they have the power to foster real learning communities in schools, focussed on improving learning for students. That is the primary goal of school self-evaluation. Regarding reporting on self-evaluation, I do not envisage that all elements of the school's self-evaluation will be published to the school community, but it should be possible for schools to report openly to parents and others on their compliance with minimum regulations, on the strengths that they have in teaching and learning, and on the priorities that they have identified for further development.

I hope that over time, this will create a genuine sense of accountability to the school community. This will, I believe, be as much a challenge for school communities as for schools. There can be a tendency – one probably rooted in the close social relationships in local communities – for parents' associations or councils to be protective of their schools when external inspection occurs. This may be understandable, but I think it is a pity if parents' associations fail to be the constructively critical friend of their schools. Certainly, an open and honest dialogue between parents, the parents' association and the school (and indeed between the

school and its students' council) can only enhance the chances that school self-evaluation will bring about genuine improvement.

If robust self-evaluation becomes embedded in schools as one would wish, it may well be possible to consider changes to external inspection. As the Inspectorate engages with schools where self-evaluation is developing, it would be natural for inspection to report on the existence of self-evaluation processes and, in time, to evaluate the effectiveness of the internal evaluation as part of its evaluation of the school's work. Certainly in some school systems, where a strong culture of critical self-review and transparent reporting becomes well established in certain schools, the external inspection process is often adjusted in various ways. External inspection continues to play its distinctive regulatory functions and it continues to provide an external expert perspective which can benefit all developing organisations, including schools. However, this can be done in a way that complements the strong self-evaluation culture within the school and I see no reason why a similar situation could not emerge in some or indeed many Irish schools.

There is undoubtedly a considerable professional development requirement for principals and other teachers if self-evaluation is to be successfully introduced. The work of PDST and the Inspectorate is one source of support. I also believe that the Inspectorate could share its evaluative expertise more directly with the school system, not only through the publication of support materials and advisory visits, but in offering numbers of principals and senior teachers the opportunity to join inspection teams for short fixed periods. Such opportunities would enable principals and senior teachers to experience evaluation in school settings other than their own, to acquire skills of observation and feedback, and to broaden their experience of school organisation. In addition, I believe that such teachers would also contribute valuable insights and learning to the Inspectorate. While there would be practical challenges to be overcome in such arrangements, I do not see these as insurmountable and I would be interested to hear the views of others on this matter.

Utilising strong feedback loops

Regular and systematically collected customer feedback is absolutely essential in monitoring the quality of any service. I have already mentioned that in school self-evaluation, schools must be open to drawing such feedback from students and parents. Within inspection, we have also moved to ensure that large-scale surveys of parents and

students, conducted using confidential questionnaires, provide a key source of evidence for inspection teams and we share this aggregated data openly with the school community.

But we also recognise that the Inspectorate itself must be open to regular feedback about the quality and standard of our own work. We found the external review of the Inspectorate conducted as part of Organisation Review Programme's examination of the Department a very challenging but worthwhile process.²⁶ We have transparent and independent complaints processes and we have conducted once-off customer satisfaction surveys, but we know that this is insufficient. We are now working to introduce the systematic collection, analysis and publication of data regarding the satisfaction of teachers, principals, parents associations and boards of management with the quality of our inspection work. We hope to introduce some of these mechanisms by the autumn of this year and to build on this work as we learn from the data we collect. A further step will be to monitor the impact that inspection has had on schools and we are also actively considering arrangements for this task.

Dealing with teacher appraisal

Ireland is unusual in not having some form of regular teacher appraisal. In many countries, the principal as the school's instructional leader, conducts regular formal reviews of the work of teachers. I would not argue for process-heavy or overly bureaucratic systems of teacher appraisal in Irish schools but I would argue that a school culture in which principals monitor the work of other teachers would be beneficial. Some do so, with positive effects on their own knowledge about their schools' work and on school improvement.

The matter also touches on the appraisal of teachers for registration purposes: this is a matter for the Teaching Council but my personal view is that some principals would be able and willing to volunteer to conduct appraisals of their newly qualified teachers and that they could be given the mechanism to do so – a mechanism that would combine self-regulation in the school and profession with appropriate external involvement of the Inspectorate in a form of smart regulation.

Regrettably, because even informal monitoring of teachers' work does not occur, the question of teacher appraisal tends to arise only when a

²⁶ ORP, *Third Report of the Organisational Review Programme*, (Dublin, Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, 2011).

case of teacher under-performance occurs. In recent years, section 24 of the Education Act has provided the legislative basis to give the school, as the employer of teachers, the means to tackle such under-performance. Critics may say that it is unfair to place the burden of dealing with under-performance on the individual school: however, schools and school management bodies have frequently defended their rights as employers of teachers and it seems to me that one cannot be the employer solely when one is selecting staff for appointment. I acknowledge, of course, that choosing to use the section 24 process, where this becomes necessary, places a considerable burden on the school principal and board of management.

The Section 24 arrangements put in place under Circulars 59/09 and 60/09 provide staged processes to address both teacher conduct and teacher professional competence issues.²⁷ The former is clearly working and I know of several conduct cases that have been successfully dealt with in this process. The procedure for competence issues provides a staged process whereby the teacher concerned is given opportunities and supports to improve practice and the school is given a process for dealing with continued under-performance if improvement does not happen. The penultimate stage of the process requires an independent report on teacher performance from the Inspectorate. By the end of 2011, two such cases had been received by the Inspectorate; one has concluded and a second is well advanced. While we are in the early days of the implementation of the Section 24 process, therefore, it appears that a combination of external regulation and inspection combined with internal self-regulation is beginning to work. I am sure that there will be considerable learning for all stakeholders as numbers of these cases are processed.

Following up inspections and dealing with under-performing schools

Finally, I want to turn to the issue of follow-up to inspection and dealing with under-performing schools.

One of the most important functions of an external inspectorate is to identify cases where schools seriously fail students. Self-regulation cannot cope with such instances for, typically, the very actors that would

²⁷ DES, *Circular 59/09: Revised procedures in relation to professional competence issues and general disciplinary matters in VECs* (Dublin, DES, 2009) and DES, *Circular 60/09 Revised procedures in relation to professional competence issues and general disciplinary matters in primary/post primary schools*, (Dublin, DES, 2009).

normally be responsible for leading change and improvement – principals, senior management and the board of management – are themselves deficient or failing to operate satisfactorily. Thankfully, instances of seriously under-performing schools are rare, but I believe that dealing with these schools is one of the most important and vital tasks in which inspectors are involved.

Since 2008, the Department has established processes to deal with instances of seriously under-performing schools. Inspectors have cooperated closely with our colleagues in the Schools Division of the Department which has responsibility for the general administration of school governance and with colleagues in other relevant sections including those dealing with the school support services. This work is overseen by an internal co-ordinating group of senior officials drawn from the Department's School Governance Section and the Inspectorate meeting as the School Improvement Group.

We have found that schools in which serious weaknesses are identified require an intervention that is tailored to the particular circumstances and context of the school. In some cases, it may be necessary for the Department to engage with the patron, trustees or management of the school to ensure that the need for improvement and change is fully appreciated by the school and those responsible for its management. Other actions can include: the provision of assistance from the School Support Services (PDST) or patron bodies; changes to the management or staffing of the school; the provision of progress reports by the schools to the Department; further inspection visits; and in some cases, financial penalties on boards of management.

From April 2008 to the end of December 2011 the School Improvement Group dealt with a total of 60 schools (39 primary schools and 21 post-primary schools). We can say that the process has been effective in 36 of the cases so far:

- 14 of these schools (11 primary and 3 post-primary) are no longer on the School Improvement agenda and
- 22 of these schools have shown significant improvement
- Work is continuing in 27 of the schools with ongoing follow-up activity.

Given the difficulties faced when attempting to turn around such situations, the figures are encouraging and I hope that this work will be improved by the lessons learned from individual cases.

While we have, rightly in my view, prioritised this work in seriously under-performing schools, and will continue to do so, I also believe that more general follow-up to inspections could be valuable. The Education Act is quite clear that responsibility for the implementation of recommendations from inspection reports is the responsibility of the school, its board and staff. The evidence from the school responses that schools submit for publication with their inspection reports shows that boards of management take recommendations seriously and that they give commitments to implement improvements. We also know that some boards seek support from the school support services or assistance from their management authority to help in the implementation of recommendations.

However, to date, the Inspectorate has not been able to follow up and verify the extent to which recommendations have been implemented other than where we have had very serious concerns about the operation of schools. This has mainly been a resource issue and the reform of our inspection models is intended to free up some time for more systematic follow-up actions in a proportion of schools. We envisage that in the case of most schools, a range of follow-up actions might be useful, including requiring a sample of boards to report on the progress achieved and in a minority of cases, a follow-up visit. This work, will I hope, enable us to get most value from external inspection and ensure that inspection and self-evaluation and school improvement work productively together as one would expect where “smart regulation” was operating effectively.

Conclusion

Much of this paper has been about systems and processes but ultimately, we can only enable young people to enjoy a rich, challenging and fulfilling educational experience when we harness the enthusiasm and commitment of professionals – the highly committed professional teachers, school leaders and managers that inspectors meet in many, many schools and the equally committed professionals that serve in the Inspectorate.

A well-integrated system of quality assurance, that blends the skills and insights of external inspectors with the local knowledge and commitment to change of the school leader, teacher and community, could harness the professional drive of all involved and it has the potential to be a powerful agent of improvement in our school system. It could also provide the

assurances of quality and information about standards to which Irish society is entitled.

The Inspectorate relishes the challenges before us and we look forward to continuing the strong, professional collaboration that we enjoy with stakeholders to achieve this vision of “responsive regulation” and high quality education services for young people. If we achieve our collective goal, I think the Irish school system will have served our young people well.
