



# An Evaluation of Planning in Thirty Primary Schools

*An Evaluation of Planning in  
Thirty Primary Schools*



AN ROINN OIDEACHAIS AGUS EOLAÍOCHTA | DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION AND SCIENCE

INSPECTORATE

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# Foreword by the Chief Inspector



Since the early 70s, whole-school planning has been promoted in Irish primary schools and, with the introduction of the Education Act 1998, school development planning has become a statutory requirement for both primary and post-primary schools. Described as a collaborative approach to planning involving the education partners, including parents, the rationale for school development planning comes from a school improvement perspective. The planning process involves a continuous cycle of development and has the potential to enhance pupil outcomes through focusing on teaching and learning, monitoring progress, and enabling schools to build their capacity to manage change.

This report, *An Evaluation of Planning in Thirty Primary Schools*, is the result of a small scale quality improvement study conducted by the Inspectorate during 2004 and 2005. It sought to evaluate the level of engagement of thirty primary schools in the process of whole-school planning, and to ascertain the level of improvement in teaching and learning which resulted. The methodology of the *audit trail* employed during the study involved the development of indicators for *inputs*, *processes* and *outcomes*. This innovative approach to evaluation was adapted from the work of the Standing International Conference of Central and General Inspectorates of Education during the *Effective School Self-Evaluation Project* (ESSE), completed in 2003. It is the first example of an audit trail being used as an evaluation methodology by the Inspectorate in Ireland.

This report is important because it provides insights into both progress and challenges associated with whole-school planning processes in primary schools. The study identified an enduring challenge for schools as they endeavour, through planning, to impact on classroom practice and to improve outcomes for pupils. Looking to the future, the findings and recommendations provide valuable material which will be of interest to a range of individuals, agencies and institutions in the education system. These include policy makers, support service teams, boards of management, school staffs, parents, and the Inspectorate itself. Each chapter concludes with some questions for reflection. It is envisaged that boards of management and school staffs, in particular, will use these as a focus for discussion as they review their current stage of development in the planning process.

Reports of this nature are an essential resource for the system. I welcome its publication and, in particular, the very clear pointers for action which have emerged.

**Eamon Stack** *Chief Inspector*

# Acknowledgements

The Inspectorate of the Department of Education and Science would like to acknowledge the generous cooperation of school principals and teachers, parents and members of boards of management in the thirty schools involved in the evaluation and in the four schools in which the instruments and methodology were piloted.

The contribution of the committee of inspectors who developed the evaluation model, carried out the evaluation in schools, and prepared this report is recognised: Micheál Ó Conghaile, Pádraig Ó Conchubhair, Brendan Doody, Deirdre Mathews and Anne Feerick. The committee acknowledges the contribution of additional inspectors who assisted with the school-based evaluation work: Karina Holton, Pádraig Mac Fhlannchadha, A M Ní Dhúill, Anthony Kelly and Máire Ní Mháirtín.

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# Glossary

## Glossary of abbreviations used in this report

DES:	Department of Education and Science
ESSE:	Effective School Self-Evaluation
INTO:	Irish National Teachers Organisation
LDS:	Leadership Development for Schools
NCCA:	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
PCSP:	Primary Curriculum Support Programme
SICI:	Standing International Conference of Inspectors
SDPI:	School Development Planning Initiative
SDPS:	School Development Planning Support
SWOT and SCOT analysis:	Analysis of provision based on identification of the school's current strengths, weaknesses/challenges, opportunities, and threats
VEC:	Vocational Education Committee







# 1. Introduction



# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Introduction

This is a composite report based on the evaluation of whole-school planning activities in thirty primary schools during 2004. The evaluation was initiated to determine progress in whole-school planning following focused support for this work since 1999. A committee of inspectors undertook the evaluation to determine the level of engagement of schools in the process of whole-school planning and to ascertain the level of improvement in teaching and learning as a result of schools' involvement in the planning process. The evaluation explored the effectiveness of schools' endeavours to identify their own strengths and to resolve their weaknesses through planned action at whole-school level.

Four main stages were important in the evaluation:

- devising indicators for the evaluation of the quality and effectiveness of whole-school planning procedures in schools,
- developing a method for evaluating whole-school planning and its implementation,
- identifying the main strengths and weaknesses in whole-school planning procedures,
- analysing schools' experiences of whole-school planning to identify good practice, and to provide signposts for further action by the various partners.

## 1.2 Indicators

The evaluation was influenced by the work of the Standing International Conference of Central and General Inspectorates of Education (SICI) on a project entitled *Effective School Self-Evaluation* (ESSE). This project, a report of which is available on the SICI web site ([www.sici.org.uk](http://www.sici.org.uk)), used an audit trail as a method of work and provided a set of indicators both for schools and for external evaluators that would enable them to evaluate schools' self-evaluation efforts. The indicators that were developed during the project adopted the distinction commonly made in quality improvement models between *inputs*, *processes*, and *outcomes*. *Inputs* refer to support, training and resources available to schools to enable them to engage in planning. *Processes* involve the activities undertaken by those associated with the schools in an effort to improve provision. *Outcomes* represent improvements achieved as a result of the process. These distinctions were also used in devising indicators for this evaluation. Twelve indicators were used and were grouped into the three categories. The indicators are described in section 2 of the report.

## 1.3 Terminology

The term whole-school planning, as distinct from school development planning, was adopted for this evaluation to avoid confusion in schools between schools' planning processes and the School Development Planning Initiative (SDPI) *per se*. While latterly, SDPI has been the primary source of support for planning, it is recognised that over a considerable period schools have received support from other sources, including the Inspectorate, education centres, a teachers' union, Department of Education and Science disadvantage initiatives, and, more recently, the Primary Curriculum Support Programme.

## 1.4 The evaluation methodology

The evaluation methodology chosen was an audit trail, which involved a detailed scrutiny and exploration of a specific aspect of a school's provision, from concept to practice. It facilitated the tracking of schools' action for improvement in areas identified by them as priorities for development. It allowed inspectors to examine schools' own records, including the results of whole-school reviews and the minutes of meetings that established the schools' present strengths, and gave priority to areas for development. School principals were asked to complete questionnaires indicating their perceptions about priority areas for development and how these had been determined. The inspectors used the information provided as a guide during a process of interviewing relevant school personnel. Principals, curriculum or organisational co-ordinators, and teachers were interviewed to enable the inspectors to gain deeper insights into the schools' level of engagement with whole-school planning activities.

Parents who had engaged in whole-school planning activities, or representatives of parents nominated by principals, also took part in the evaluation. Their views about involvement in the process were sought through interviews. The chairpersons of boards of management were interviewed to gain insight into their knowledge of and involvement in whole-school planning and to further verify the evidence gathered from personnel within the school.

## 1.5 Context

The evaluation was conducted against the background of rapid change in education in Ireland. School development planning became a statutory requirement under the Education Act (1998). It was identified as the basic element of a performance management system for first-level and second-level schools in the Programme for Prosperity and Fairness (2000) as a means of improving the quality of education provision. In that document, which was the basis for agreement between the Government and the social partners on a strategy for social and economic development, school development planning is understood to be a collaborative and developmental process, which must be prepared through consultation with all the partners, including parents. The Department of Education and Science (DES), in its Strategy Statement, 2001-2004, pledged to support school improvement through the School Development Planning Initiative, while the teachers' unions made commitments under *Sustaining Progress* (2003) that school development planning would continue to be implemented and embedded in the school system.

It was also agreed under the mid-term review of *Sustaining Progress* (February 2005) that school development planning would continue to be developed within the primary and post-primary schools, with a particular emphasis on addressing the development needs of teaching staff in the schools, to ensure that the full potential contribution of all teachers would be realised.

Since 1999, a number of developments at primary-school level provided a focus for review of the curriculum:

- The Primary School Curriculum launched in 1999 represented the first major change in the curriculum since 1971.

- The Primary Curriculum Support Programme (PCSP) was established to mediate the curriculum for teachers and to enable them to implement it in their schools.
- The Regional Curriculum Support Service (or Cuiditheoirí service) was established as a central component of the PCSP.
- The school year 2003/2004 was designated a year of consolidation and review of the implementation of the Primary School Curriculum (1999).

In parallel, the roles and responsibilities of in-school management were reviewed and formalised (DES circular 07/03). This facilitated the formation of middle-management teams and encouraged schools to emphasise the centrality of planning as a function of internal management. Within this framework, the DES initiated support for school management and school planning in a number of ways.

- In 1999 the *Guide to School Development Planning* was published, following a process of consultation between inspectors and the education partners, and this was distributed to all primary schools. It presented information and suggestions on whole-school review and policy development in curriculum and organisational areas.
- Also in 1999, the School Development Planning Initiative (SDPI) was established to promote planning in primary and post-primary schools. This initiative offered training and support for schools to enhance their engagement in the process of school development planning. The service sought to support collaborative planning as a means of promoting schools' effectiveness and improvement. At primary level, all schools were invited to participate in training over a five-year period. Support for principals and teachers was provided, and frameworks for assisting with completing in-school planning documents were developed.

- In 2002 the DES initiated the Leadership Development for Schools (LDS) programme to promote professional development for the principals and deputy principals of primary and post-primary schools.

An important contextual factor has been the development and refinement of evaluation materials and procedures by the Inspectorate in recent years.

- In 2003 the Inspectorate published *Looking at Our School: An Aid to Self-Evaluation in Primary Schools*. This document provides schools with a framework for supporting internal review of school policies and for promoting schools' effectiveness and improvement in five broad areas: management, planning, curriculum provision, quality of teaching and learning, and support for pupils.
- Whole-school evaluation (WSE), as a model of external evaluation for primary and post-primary schools, was formally introduced in 2003/2004. The WSE process evaluates schools, taking account of the evaluation framework presented in *Looking at Our School*.

As part of a range of evaluation models, a number of detailed thematic evaluation projects have been undertaken recently by the Inspectorate.

- A focused evaluation of education provision in the areas of literacy and numeracy in twelve disadvantaged schools was carried out in 2004. The results were published in a report entitled *Literacy and Numeracy in Disadvantaged Schools: Challenges for Teachers and Learners* (2005).



- In the school year 2003/2004 an evaluation of curriculum implementation in English, visual arts and mathematics in eighty-six primary schools resulted in the publication of *An Evaluation of Curriculum Implementation in Primary Schools: English, Mathematics and Visual Arts* (2005).

The present document – *An Evaluation of Planning in Thirty Primary Schools* – is a further report arising from a focused evaluation conducted by the Inspectorate at primary level and is the first example of an audit trail being used as an evaluation methodology.

## 1.6 Structure of the report

The report is organised in six sections. Section 1 – this introduction – provides the background against which whole-school planning in Irish primary schools is placed. Section 2 summarises the methodology used in the evaluation. Section 3 outlines the support and guidance available to schools, it identifies effective practice, and draws attention to areas where there is scope for development. Section 4 describes the involvement of the partners in the planning process, the extent to which schools deal with improvement when engaging in planning, and the structures they have established to ensure that a continuous process of development takes place. Section 5 illustrates the degree to which planning enhances provision in the school in relation to resources, teaching and learning, and pupils' achievement. Section 6 outlines the findings and proposes recommendations for future development in the area of whole-school planning.





## **2. Methodology**



## 2. Methodology

### 2.1 Evaluation objectives

The general objective of the evaluation was to determine and to report on the quality of whole-school planning in a sample of primary schools. In particular, the evaluation sought to:

- identify how effective primary schools were in achieving continuous improvement by engaging in self-review, by planning, and by taking action to build on their strengths and to address their weaknesses,
- identify elements of good practice, and
- make recommendations that would inform practice in respect of whole-school planning.

### 2.2 Selection of schools

The Evaluation Support and Research Unit (ESRU) of the Inspectorate randomly selected thirty schools to participate in the evaluation. The selection procedure ensured that the sample included a variety of school types and locations. Ten inspectors engaged in the focused inspection; each inspector evaluated planning activities in three schools. Following consultation with the principal in the selected schools, two days during the period February-May 2004 were nominated for the school-based evaluation activity. During the two-day visits, the inspectors gathered evidence through interviewing, scrutinising documents, observing practice, and analysing data provided by the schools.

## 2.3 The evaluation procedures

The committee of inspectors adopted the audit trail as the working method for the evaluation. Before the visits to schools, the principals were asked to complete a questionnaire to determine their perception of planning activities in their school and to guide the inspectors in their in-school evaluation activities. Discussions were also held with the principals to identify the school's planning priorities.

The main components of the evaluation activity were:

- semi-structured interviews with principals,
- scrutiny of whole-school planning documents,
- semi-structured interviews with planning co-ordinators, class teachers, parents, and chairpersons of boards of management, and
- classroom observation of practice related to areas given priority for development by the schools.

A questionnaire, a schedule of questions for interviews and a standard framework for recording evidence were designed, and a briefing session was organised for the team of inspectors nominated to undertake the evaluation work. The Appendix provides a summary of the interview schedules, showing how triangulation of the data occurred.

## 2.4 Indicators

A set of indicators was developed to assist in gathering information and to ensure consistency. The indicators identify important features of practice in each of the three aspects: *inputs*, *processes*, and *outcomes*. Information was sought about each indicator through a series of questions presented in a common schedule. These questions were designed to determine the level of success of the school in the process of planning for improvement. Table 2.1 describes the indicators used.

**Table 2.1: Indicators used in gathering information**

Aspect	Indicators	Core issues examined
<b>Input</b>	External support	Use of external agencies and documents to guide planning for improvement
	Internal guidance	Leadership and use of expertise within the school to guide planning
	Professional development	Provision of in-service, support for attending courses to enhance teachers' capacity to engage in planning, or support in other ways
<b>Process</b>	Collaboration	Extent to which all partners are actively engaged in the planning process
	Action focused on improvement	Use of whole-school review, establishment of priorities, action planning, and regular monitoring of implementation
	Systematic, ongoing commitment to planning	Establishment of structures to support planning, and commitment to improvement

<b>Outcomes</b>	Awareness of concept of school development planning	Appreciation of the value of whole-school planning in leading improvement
	Professional development	Changes in attitudes and practice as a result of planning
	Effective use of a wide range of material resources	Provision, availability and use of resources to support learning in priority areas
	Effective use of a broad range of teaching methodologies	Use of a wider range of teaching approaches
	Active, participative learning	Learning experiences for pupils
	Improved attainment by pupils	Monitoring and measurement of pupils' achievement and effect of planning on improved pupils' attainment

## 2.5 Scope of the evaluation

For the purpose of this evaluation, two aspects of provision in each school were examined. The principals were requested to nominate two priorities, identified by the school during its planning process, to be explored. Through the audit trail, the quality and the impact of planning on provision and practice in the schools' priority areas were judged. The aspects of practice nominated by principals are listed in Table 2.2.



Table 2.2: Aspects of practice nominated as priority areas by school principals

Aspects of practice	Number
English	16
Mathematics	11
Visual arts	5
Irish	4
Science and environmental awareness	3
Social, personal and health education (SPHE)	2
Physical education	1
Managing pupils' behaviour	6
Record-keeping	2
Developing a mission statement	1
Safety statement	1
Attendance	1
Learning support and special needs	1
Homework	1
No aspect given priority	2

A majority of schools selected curriculum areas as priorities for development. These priorities generally reflected the focus of the consolidation and review year as designated by the DES. In a few schools, specific priorities for development had not been selected, or only one priority was nominated by the principal for the evaluation.

## 2.6 Qualitative and quantitative terminology

When they had gathered evidence from the range of sources, the inspectors collated the information and completed evaluative statements for each indicator on standard frameworks. The quality of planning in each school was rated under each indicator on a four-point scale, as follows:

Level of performance	Qualitative terms used in the report
Optimum level	Very good
Competent practice	Good
Scope for development	Fair
Experiencing difficulty	Weak


School personnel were selected for interview in accordance with their involvement with the identified priority areas for development, and the classrooms to be visited were suggested by the principals as appropriate to these priorities.

In compiling the report, qualitative terms were used to illustrate percentages, as follows:

Qualitative terms used in this report	Percentages
Almost all	> 90
Most	75-90
Majority	50-74
Fewer than half	25-49
A small number	16-24
A few	Up to 15

Some relevant quotations from the inspectors' reports are included in text boxes throughout this report, and each section of the report concludes with a set of questions for reflection. These questions should give direction to those concerned with improving the quality of teaching and learning through whole-school planning.



A glowing lightbulb with rays of light emanating from it, set against a warm, golden background. The lightbulb is positioned on the left side of the frame, and its glow illuminates the surrounding area, creating a sense of inspiration and ideas.

### **3. Inputs to support planning in schools**



# 3. Inputs to support planning in schools

## 3.1 Introduction

This section provides an overview of the supports available to schools in respect of planning for school improvement. It aims to determine what supports are provided for schools to enhance teachers' capacity to engage in whole-school planning and to what extent these supports are used.

The data gathered relates to three indicators:

- external support,
- internal guidance, and
- professional development.

The information was generated by means of:

- semi-structured interviews with principals,
- a scrutiny of whole-school planning documents, and
- semi-structured interviews with planning co-ordinators, teachers and chairpersons of boards of management.

Schools listed the external agencies and initiatives that were involved in guiding their whole-school planning process, and they identified other external influences on their planning activities. Internal school supports for planning were also described. The schools reported on teamwork, collaboration, the assignment of duties and responsibilities, and management structures related to whole-school planning. The impact of these supports was evaluated. The extent to which individual planning was influenced by participation in whole-school planning was investigated. The impact of a school's agreed priority area as a stimulus for attendance at in-service or for the engagement of external

assistance was also considered. The inspectors judged whether these supports were used to advantage in promoting whole-school planning.

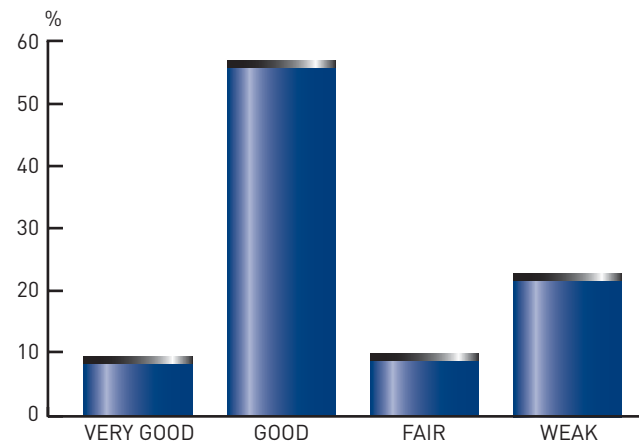
## 3.2 External supports for planning

Schools reported that a wide range of external support services was available to them. The School Development Planning Support (SDPS) service and the Primary Curriculum Support Programme (PCSP) – which includes the Regional Curriculum Support (Cuiditheoirí) service – are major DES initiatives established to provide support for schools. Most schools availed of support for planning from the SDPS (77%) or PCSP (70%) or both, and fewer than half the schools (26%) used the service of cuiditheoirí. A small number received support from principals of other schools or from religious orders and patron bodies, a teachers’ union, principals’ groups, management bodies, and outside speakers. They drew on various initiatives and on such bodies as Leadership Development for Schools (LDS), Barnardo’s, vocational education committees, and education centres. In addition, the reports following the completion of a school evaluation process (the “*tuairisci scoile*”) was viewed as a “*menu for action*.” Furthermore, specific training such as that provided for *Reading Recovery* was credited with supporting whole-school planning in one instance.

The impact of these supports on whole-school planning varied. Fig. 3.1 illustrates the ratings given to schools by the inspectors for their use of external support.



Fig. 3.1: External supports for planning



#### Optimum level or competent practice

A few schools (10%) were rated “very good” in relation to using external supports to further their whole-school planning processes, and the majority (57%) were “good.” In these schools, external personnel working with the school staff were considered successful in organising courses and encouraging teamwork and staff collaboration. They facilitated whole-school review, guided planning, provided structure to the planning process, and made possible the development of mission statements and the writing of a variety of policies. The effective use of structured frameworks for developing policies in these schools ensured that policies contained clear aims, referred to content and, in some curriculum policies, outlined methodologies and support for

implementation. A few of the school policies evaluated included review dates and assigned responsibility for specific areas of planning to particular teachers. A few schools had established their own useful *modus operandi*, whereby outside agencies were consulted and their expertise was used.

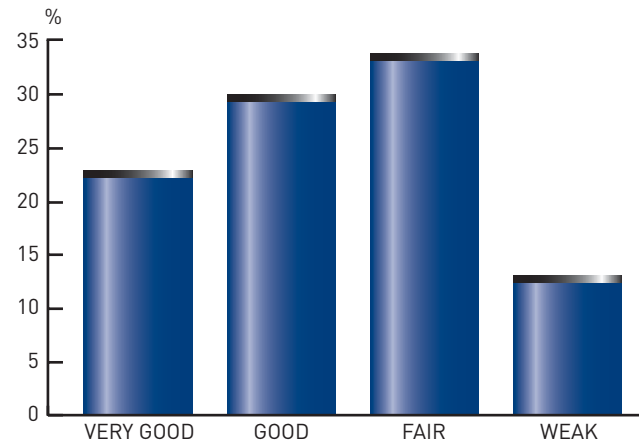
### Scope for development or experiencing difficulty

A few schools (10%) were rated “fair” in relation to effective use of external support for planning, while 23% were rated “weak” in this area. In these schools SDPS and PCSP personnel had offered assistance and in some instances had guided the planning process and the development of policies. Although personnel in these schools attended designated seminars and planning days, additional support sought from external personnel was limited and sometimes confined to one occasion only or to one curriculum area. Some teachers exhibited a measure of uncertainty in respect of services employed by the school. Some SDPS, NCCA and PCSP documents, such as curriculum planning frameworks, were available in these schools; however, they were used to minimal effect, and the planning documents lacked reference to priorities and teaching methodologies.

## 3.3 Internal supports for planning

The internal supports for planning available to schools include the board of management, the principal, the in-school management team, and individual teachers with expertise in particular areas. The development opportunities availed of through these supports were used to varying degrees, as illustrated in Fig. 3.2.

Fig. 3.2: Internal supports for planning



### Optimum level or competent practice

A small number of schools (23%) was rated “very good” and a further 30% were rated “good” in their use of internal expertise and their leadership in developing structures for supporting and guiding planning. In all, effective practice was reported in 53% of schools. In most of these schools, personnel within the school were used effectively to support the planning process. Most frequently it was the principal (75%) who provided internal guidance, while in half the schools, post-holders, planning co-ordinators and teachers also provided guidance. Teams or committees were formed to lead planning in fewer than half the schools (27%). Other formal structures established to support and guide planning internally included the allocation of time for planning and the holding of regular

meetings. Where schools were making effective use of internal support for planning, ‘excellent guidance’, ‘systematic leadership’, ‘a very inclusive approach’, and a ‘consultative and proactive approach’ were terms chosen by inspectors to describe the process.

Teachers with specific responsibility for aspects of planning or with particular expertise had been charged with formulating and/or implementing school policy in agreed areas. Samples of good practice included individuals or teams of teachers drafting and developing policies in curriculum and organisational areas, and in turn submitting these to the teaching staff for discussion and approval.

### Scope for development or experiencing difficulty

It is significant to note that there was scope for development in 47% of schools concerning the use of internal supports for planning. Fewer than half of the schools (34%) were rated “fair” and 13% were rated “weak” in this regard. In these schools the principals (75%) led the planning process, but little evidence of the delegation of responsibility to planning committees or co-ordinators was available. In a few instances, the teachers relied unduly on textbooks or hand-outs provided by the principal as the basis for policy formulation.

Where less effective practice was noted, a further factor was the limited extent to which boards of management provided internal support for planning. Board members were not actively involved in the discussion and development of policy and instead, their role was limited to ratifying final drafts devised and presented by the teaching staff. Furthermore, structures for involving parents as an internal support had not been established, and their role had not been explored.

*“Planning is seen as being removed from what teachers do in their classrooms and as irrelevant.”*

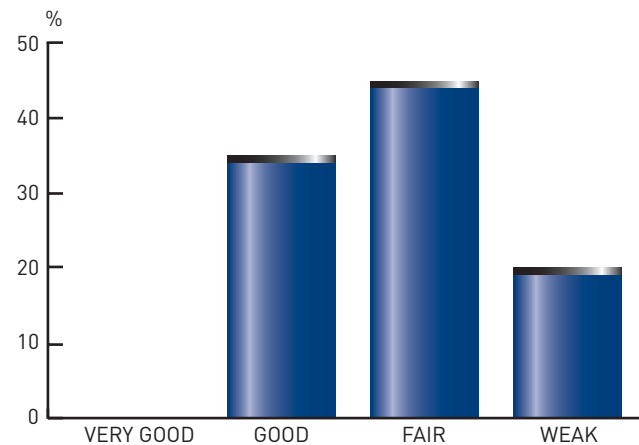
Inspector’s quote

In schools rated “fair” or “weak,” some elements of positive practice were evident. Some schools had engaged in whole-school review; others had devised planning diaries and compiled draft policies. Also, teachers in a few schools considered staff meetings and summer courses to be worthwhile in advancing the planning process. However, a number of factors contributed to the assignment of “fair” or “weak” ratings to particular schools. Among these were the following: an absence of formal structures to support planning, such as planning teams or curriculum coordinators; a failure to assign priorities and to plan strategically; and engagement in the planning process to fulfil DES or statutory requirements rather than as a process of internal school improvement.

### 3.4 Professional development

The inspectors evaluated professional development as an input in the whole-school planning process. The chairpersons of boards of management were asked about professional development opportunities provided for teachers and principals, and teachers were asked to report on their engagement in professional development activities. The inspectors reported on professional development as an input in 63% of schools. Fig. 3.3 illustrates the ratings given to these schools by the inspectors.

Fig. 3.3: Professional development as an input



#### Optimum level or competent practice

Fewer than half of the schools where professional development was reported as an input (35%) were rated “good,” and no school was rated “very good.” In these schools, in addition to the external agencies that support planning, the involvement of external facilitators or outside experts had influenced staff members positively. Examples of good practice included schools employing external experts to give professional development courses, teachers engaging in research through the internet or through networking with other teachers, and attendance at courses and conferences related to whole-school planning or to planning priorities.

### Scope for development or experiencing difficulty

Where professional development as an input to planning was reported, 45% of schools were rated “fair” and a further 20% were rated “weak.” In these schools there was no evidence of a coherent or structured approach to professional development, nor had professional development opportunities been provided in relation to the process of planning or to planning priorities. In a small number of schools, teachers had attended courses, and in a few schools the board of management wished to enable staff members to attend courses and seminars. In spite of the support services available to schools, a lack of funding was cited by some chairpersons as inhibiting the employment of external experts to facilitate staff development.

## 3.5 Conclusions

Where schools were rated at optimum level or competent practice, this evaluation identified the following positive characteristics in relation to *inputs*:

- A wide variety of external supports is used effectively by schools.
- External personnel facilitate effective whole-school review and guide planning.
- Structured frameworks are used effectively in the development of policies.
- The principal, assisted by other teachers, leads the planning process.
- Formal structures, such as allocation of time for planning and regular meetings, are established.
- Training provided to support specific aspects of the curriculum, for example *Reading Recovery*, can assist with the overall planning process.

Where schools were rated at scope for development or experiencing difficulty, concerns in relation to *inputs* were characterised by the following features:

- External supports are used insufficiently.
- Limited use has been made of structured planning frameworks and materials.
- Members of boards of management and parents do not play an active role in whole-school planning activities.
- The principal has retained responsibility for planning, and there is not enough delegation of responsibility.
- The practice of supporting the attendance of teachers at courses related to planning or to priority areas is limited.
- Some chairpersons of boards of management cite lack of funding as inhibiting professional development.



### Some questions for reflection

To what extent are external agencies and documents used to guide planning for improvement?

To what extent are leadership and expertise within schools positively exploited to guide planning?

To what extent are professional development opportunities linked to whole-school planning priorities?





## **4. The processes of planning**



# 4. The processes of planning

## 4.1 Introduction

This section examines the planning processes undertaken by schools in order to improve the quality of teaching and learning. It considers the arrangements schools have established to facilitate the engagement of the partners in whole-school planning.

The data gathered related to the following indicators:

- collaboration,
- action focused on improvement, and
- systematic, ongoing commitment to planning and monitoring implementation and achievement.

The information was gathered by means of:

- semi-structured interviews with principals,
- a scrutiny of whole-school planning documents,
- semi-structured interviews with planning co-ordinators, class teachers, parents, and chairpersons of boards of management, and
- classroom observation of practice related to priority areas for development.

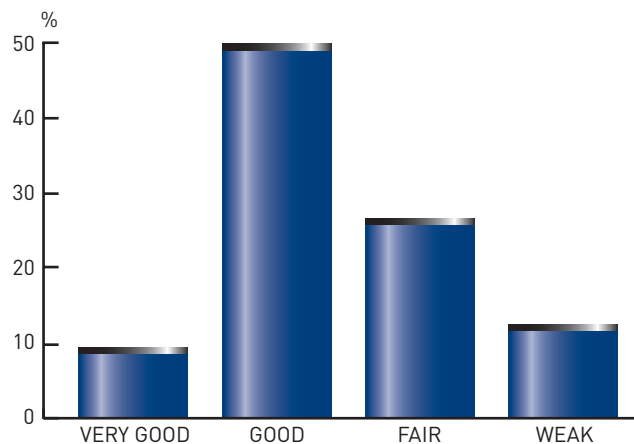
The inspectors evaluated the level at which school communities were working collaboratively in defining their needs and in responding to those needs through the planning process. They investigated whether systems existed to facilitate whole-school review. The school's engagement in action planning was explored to establish the extent to which action was concentrated on school improvement in relation to the identified priority areas. Reasons for giving priority to certain areas

were discussed, and arrangements for the monitoring of progress in priority areas were explored. In evaluating the level of commitment to whole-school planning as a systematic and ongoing process, the inspectors posed a series of questions to determine the structures established by each school to promote and maintain the process.

## 4.2 Collaboration

*The Education Act (1998)* charges the board of management of a school with responsibility for preparing a school plan, in consultation with the parents, the patron, staff members and the pupils in the school. Members of boards of management, principals, teachers and parents were interviewed to determine their level of engagement with the process of planning. Fig. 4.1 illustrates the effectiveness of the collaborative process in schools.

Fig. 4.1: Collaboration in whole-school planning



*“Teachers collaborate in the planning process on an ongoing basis and the vast majority are actively involved in key aspects of planning”.*

Inspector's quote

### Optimum level or competent practice

Collaboration in whole-school planning was rated “good” in half the schools (50%) with a further 10% rated “very good.” For most of these schools collaboration involved the teachers working towards agreed goals in sub-committees, at staff meetings, or at in-service planning days. While common themes emerged in relation to certain aspects of collaboration, a variety of practice was evident in the degree to which teachers collaborated in identifying and working on a school’s needs. Effective practice in small schools included teachers meeting in cluster groups and working collaboratively to share ideas and plan organisational and curricular aspects of school policy. In larger schools, planning teams were formed, and a senior member of the staff, usually the principal, guided team meetings. In these instances, meetings were convened regularly, teachers with particular expertise led certain aspects of planning, and a high degree of consultation with other staff members was evident.

Collaboration between boards of management and teachers in the planning process only occurred to some extent, even in schools with positive ratings. Where collaboration took place, it was largely confined to organisational aspects of planning, such as the preparation of health and safety statements, or to approving and ratifying policies presented by the teachers.

The majority of the schools that were rated “good” or “very good” reported that parents collaborated in the planning process. Their involvement related to the development of organisational policies, such as the code of behaviour and anti-bullying policy, and to curriculum policies in areas such as social, personal and health education (SPHE). In some instances parents’ associations were involved to the extent that they were presented with draft policies for comment, and their suggested amendments were discussed and adopted where appropriate.

### Scope for development or experiencing difficulty

Just over a quarter of the schools (27%) were rated “fair” in relation to collaboration in the planning process, and a further 13% were rated “weak.” Most of these schools received low ratings as a result of insufficient involvement by parents and members of the board of management. The inspectors reported a lack of collaboration among teachers in only a few schools. Among the weaknesses identified were: downloading of policies from the internet and presenting them to colleagues as completed work; difficulties regarding internal communication; and lack of teamwork by teachers in the planning process.

In relation to collaboration, members of boards of management cited a lack of knowledge and expertise as an impediment to involvement in the planning process. A few asserted that the production of curriculum policies was not within their remit and that it was the teachers who had the expertise required to produce such policies. The lack of collaboration evident in the planning process was exemplified in the following response offered by a chairperson: ‘Insofar as we have anybody on the board of management who is capable of, or interested in, analysing policies, then yes the board of management is involved.’ The need for specific training for boards of management in many aspects of school life, including the planning process, was raised by a number of chairpersons.

There was little evidence of collaborative involvement by parents in the planning process in schools rated “weak” or “fair.” Some principals expressed a desire to bring about the meaningful involvement of parents; however, structures aimed at facilitating active collaboration with parents through the planning process had not been established. Discussions with parents revealed the view

*“Parents have been informed of the outcomes [of planning] . . . In all, twenty policies have been supplied to them, but except for the RSE policy, parents have not been involved in the process of formulating the policies now developed.”*

Inspector’s quote

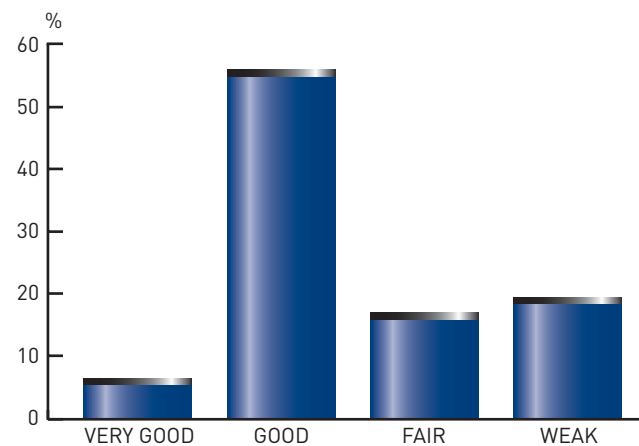


that most did not see themselves as having a role, collaborative or otherwise, in the drafting of policies in curriculum areas. This was seen by parents to be within the remit of teachers only.

### 4.3 Action focused on school improvement

A central emphasis of whole-school planning is to engage all the partners in a continuous process of school improvement. Information was sought by the inspectors to determine whether schools maintained a focus on improvement as they engaged in planning activities. Fig. 4.2 represents the level of focus on school improvement.

Fig. 4.2: Action focused on school improvement



### Optimum level or competent practice

“Very good” practice was reported in a few schools (7%) in relation to planning focused on school improvement, with a further 56% reported “good.” Where effective practice was reported, the schools had engaged in a whole-school review, either formally or informally, in the recent past, and specific areas had been identified as priorities for development. Agreement on priority areas was reached using a number of models, including SWOT or SCOT analysis, *tuairisc scoile* recommendations, and the curriculum review model provided by the NCCA. Whole-school review facilitated a consensus on the school’s priorities, and teachers displayed clear knowledge and understanding of the agreed priority areas.

*“Teachers are thoroughly aware of current priorities and some action plans have been drawn up. There is clear evidence in the planning documentation that planning is focused on school improvement.”*

Inspector’s quote

The degree to which these schools provided formal action plans for improvement in priority areas varied greatly. In the majority of schools, agreement regarding action to be taken was reached. However, fewer than half of the schools compiled formal written action plans. In a few schools, teachers’ monthly reports were used as a means of recording progress in priority areas. Where available, action plans referred to how developments in priority areas were to be implemented and monitored over a specific period. They included review dates and assigned specific responsibilities to various members of the staff.

There was little or no evidence of collaborative approaches to the realisation of plans that involved parents or members of the board of management. Where curriculum areas were given priority, reference was made to the strands and strand units of the curriculum. Suitable reference was also made to a variety of methodologies and resources that would be of benefit in the teaching and learning process. Where action plans had not been compiled, little evidence was found of defined strategies for implementing, monitoring, and reviewing progress.

*“The failure to bring curricular plans to a final stage of recorded development significantly limits the capacity of the plan to systematically influence school improvement in the long term”*

Inspector’s quote

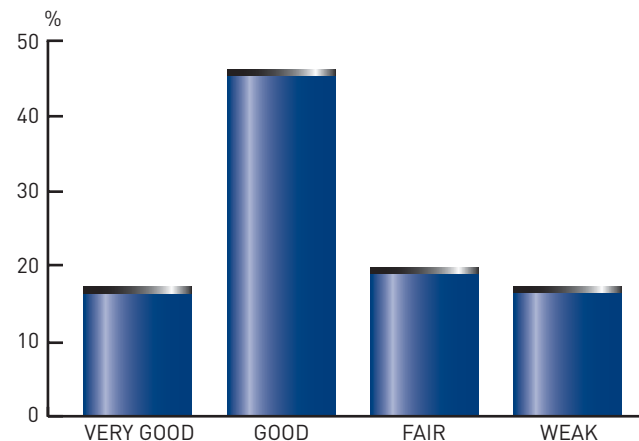
### Scope for development or experiencing difficulty

In relation to action focused on school improvement, 17% of schools were rated “fair” and a further 20% were rated “weak.” In the majority of these schools, whole-school reviews had not taken place. There was a lack of clarity among teachers and principals about the challenges facing the school. Even where priority areas were outlined by individual teachers or in planning documents, it was not clear how the issue of school improvement was addressed. In schools where curriculum plans were provided, their impact was neither formally monitored nor reviewed. Parents’ representatives and members of the board of management were not involved in specific actions for school improvement. Parents’ views were typified by the comment that the involvement of parents in curricular areas was unnecessary, given that the curriculum was ‘prescribed.’ There was a sense among parents that the curriculum falls within the professional domain of teachers, and therefore they were not qualified to comment or make a contribution in that regard.

## 4.4 Systematic, ongoing commitment

The extent to which schools were committed to improving provision in a systematic and continuous way was measured through evaluating the structures they had established to ensure that the whole-school planning process was a continuous one. Evidence was sought in relation to the establishment of planning teams, to specific responsibility being delegated to individuals, to time being set aside for meetings, and to the preparation of strategic plans. Fig. 4.3 represents the inspectors’ findings in this regard.

Fig. 4.3: Systematic, ongoing commitment



#### Optimum level or competent practice

The inspectors reported “very good” practice in a small number of schools (17%), and “good” practice in a further 46% according to the extent to which the school was committed to whole-school planning in a systematic and continuous manner. Elements of effective practice incorporated a commitment to continuous planning in agreed areas, committees or groups of teachers meeting regularly to devise policies in a systematic way, whole-school reviews being initiated, and the production of long-term or short-term improvement plans. Further evidence of commitment to continuous improvement was apparent where principals, post-holders or teachers assuming leadership roles guided work within the priority areas.

Even in schools where competent practice was reported, there was little evidence of a meaningful level of commitment to the process of whole-school planning in a systematic, continuous manner, either by the board of management or by parents.

#### Scope for development or experiencing difficulty

With regard to their commitment to planning as a systematic and continuous process, a small number of the schools (20%) were rated “fair” and a further 17% were rated “weak.” Whereas these schools had produced school policies, in almost all instances priorities for improvement had not been defined, and structures for promoting regular review by teachers had not been established. Furthermore, structures to accommodate systematic, continuous involvement by either the board of management or the parents had not been established.

## 4.5 Conclusions

Where schools were rated at optimum level or competent practice, this evaluation identified the following positive characteristics in relation to *processes*:

- Most teachers collaborate to some extent in planning.
- Collaboration involves teachers working towards agreed goals, in cluster groups, at staff meetings, on planning teams, and on in-service days.
- Teachers reach agreement on priority areas for development using a variety of models.
- Teachers display an awareness and understanding of priority areas for planning.
- Teachers are committed to planning.
- Work on priority areas is guided effectively by principals, post-holders and teachers who are facilitated in assuming leadership roles.

Where schools were rated at scope for development or experiencing difficulty, concerns related to *processes* were characterised by the following features:

- Involvement by members of boards of management and by parents is largely confined to organisational aspects of planning.
- Members of boards of management cite a lack of knowledge and expertise as an impediment to involvement in planning.
- Parents do not see themselves as having a role in planning for curriculum provision.
- The process of writing formal action plans is not embedded.
- Curriculum plans are not monitored or reviewed regularly.
- Priorities for development have yet to be identified.
- Structures to accommodate systematic, continuous involvement by parents and boards of management have not yet been established.

### Some questions for reflection

To what extent are all partners actively engaged in the whole-school planning process?

To what extent has whole-school review led to the identification of priorities for development, to the writing of action plans, and to regular monitoring of implementation and impact?

To what extent have structures and processes been established that encompass a commitment to school improvement?







## **5. Outcomes of planning**



# 5. Outcomes of planning

## 5.1 Introduction

This section outlines the outcomes of planning processes in schools. It addresses the impact of planning on teachers' attitudes and practice and their appreciation of the value of whole-school planning in leading improvement. It explores the influence of whole-school planning on pupils' learning experiences. It considers the structures that have been established to monitor pupils' achievement and examines the link between pupils' attainment and whole-school planning.

The data gathered related to the following indicators:

- awareness of the concept of school development planning,
- professional development,
- effective use of a wide range of material resources,
- effective use of a broad range of teaching methodologies,
- active participative learning, and
- improved attainment by pupils.

The information was gathered by means of:

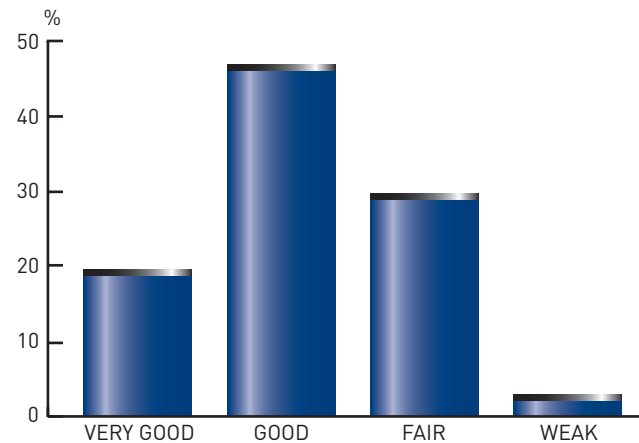
- semi-structured interviews with principals,
- a scrutiny of whole-school planning documents,
- semi-structured interviews with planning co-ordinators, class teachers, parents, and chairpersons of boards of management, and
- classroom observation of practice related to priority areas for development.

The inspectors evaluated the school community's familiarity with the concept of whole-school planning and the extent to which it had been a support in advancing learning. They looked for indications of attitudinal change among teachers and the extent to which this was reflected in their individual planning and practices. They examined schools' processes for monitoring improvements, and they investigated the relationship between whole-school planning and improved achievement by pupils.

## 5.2 Awareness of concept

Whole-school planning is an essential element of the school improvement process. It enables schools to engage in self-review, to develop whole-school policies, to monitor progress, to identify their own professional development needs, and in turn to improve the quality of teaching and learning in the school. The level of awareness of whole-school planning as a tool for improvement was evaluated by the inspectors, and their ratings are illustrated in Fig. 5.1.

Fig. 5.1: Awareness of concept



#### Optimum level or competent practice

A majority of schools (67%) were rated effective in relation to their awareness of the concept of whole-school planning. A small number (20%) demonstrated “very good” awareness, and fewer than half (47%) had a “good” awareness. In almost all of these schools, the teachers had a clear understanding of the concept of whole-school planning and attached a high level of value to it.

Notwithstanding this very positive position, it is worth noting that even in schools where the inspectors awarded “very good” ratings, parents’ awareness of the potential of whole-school planning was limited. Predominantly, their familiarity with the concept was limited to their involvement in developing policies in areas such as health and safety, substance use, discipline, and anti-bullying policy. Rarely did they see whole-school planning as a tool for improving learning.

### Scope for development or experiencing difficulty

It is significant that in a third of schools, awareness of the concept of whole-school planning was rated “fair” or “weak.” Almost all the teachers in these schools had some knowledge of the concept of whole-school planning and its value; however, this was not reflected in action. Examples of practice in these schools included the principal taking responsibility for writing the planning documents, priorities for development not being identified, and individual teachers not relating their individual planning to the school plan.

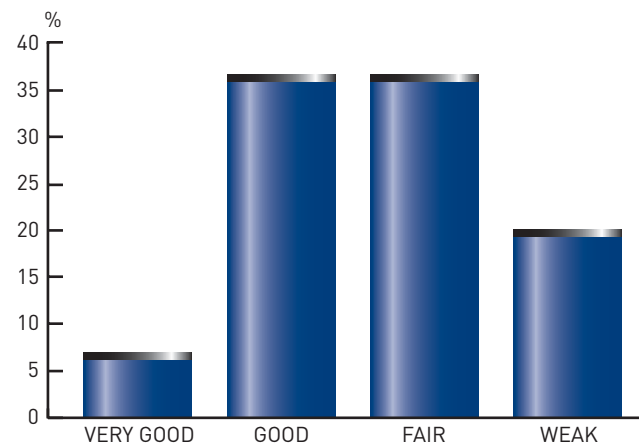
In these schools, parents and members of the boards of management had only a limited familiarity with the concept of whole-school planning as a tool for improvement. Nonetheless, they had engaged with planning in such areas as health and safety, homework, discipline, and anti-bullying policy, and they were involved in the ratification of policies produced by the teachers. In a few of these schools the chairperson expressed the belief that both board members and parents would take a more active part in planning if they were facilitated in participating in the process.

### 5.3 Professional development

Whole-school planning provides an opportunity to improve learning for both pupils and teachers. The extent to which teachers' learning is enhanced depends on a number of factors, but it is generally accepted that whole-school planning, with its emphasis on review and reflection, can bring about deep-rooted change in schools.

The inspectors evaluated the extent to which engagement in the whole-school planning process had brought about changes in teachers' attitudes and work practices. Fig. 5.2 presents the findings.

**Fig. 5.2: Professional development**



### Optimum level or competent practice

It is significant that positive outcomes for teachers' professional development were reported in fewer than half the schools. Where professional development was reported as an outcome of planning, a few schools (7%) were rated "very good" and fewer than half (36.5%) as "good." Teachers' professional development was advanced through discussion at staff meetings, involvement in planning meetings, and a high level of engagement in teamwork and collaboration. In these schools there was evidence of a move from dependence on the principal leading planning to a situation where the teachers took an active role in the process.

*"[Teachers have a] sound understanding of whole-school issues and clearly see their role as part of a team. They are thoroughly aware of the progress made with the current planning priority."*

Inspector's quote

As a result of involvement in the planning process, a high level of team spirit was established, positive attitudes towards planning were fostered, teachers' ownership of and openness to planning were enhanced, feelings of isolation were reduced, and teachers grew in awareness of one another's practices. They appreciated the value of policies and procedures for the general management of the school and for the level of cohesion and uniformity created. They became more aware of the breadth of curriculum areas, and in some instances this led to changes in teaching methodologies, growth in confidence in using materials, and engagement in active approaches. The willingness of some teachers to undertake whole-school planning activities outside school hours was mentioned as an indication of the value they placed on the process.



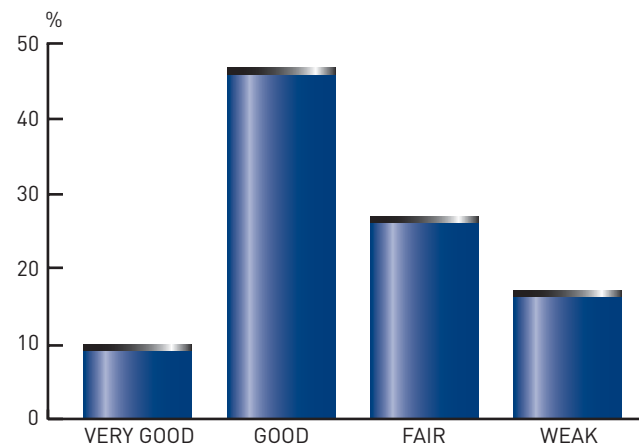
### Scope for development or experiencing difficulty

Little or no evidence of positive outcomes for teachers' professional development as a result of planning was apparent in the majority of schools, with 36.5% receiving a "fair" rating and 20% rated as "weak." While it was acknowledged that team spirit and a sense of collegiality had been developed in some of these schools as a result of the planning process, in others the lack of team spirit was attributed to limited opportunities to work together.

## 5.4 Effective use of a broad range of teaching methodologies

The inspectors attempted to evaluate whether schools made effective use of a broad range of teaching methodologies and differentiated approaches as a consequence of whole-school planning. It is important to note in this regard that the background against which this evaluation took place was one where, at system level, the emphasis was being placed on curriculum implementation and the use of school development planning as a tool in assisting the process. Fig. 5.3 illustrates the inspectors' findings.

Fig. 5.3: Effective use of a broad range of teaching methodologies



#### Optimum level or competent practice

Taking account of the fact that the use of a broad range of teaching methodologies was explored in a situation of curriculum change, a few schools (10%) were rated “very good,” and fewer than half (47%) were rated “good.” In general, these schools had identified a wide range of teaching approaches in their planning documents, and there was evidence of priority being given to the approaches embodied in the *Primary School Curriculum* (1999). Examples of good practice associated with the identified priority areas were the effective use of group activities, whole-class teaching with support for individual pupils, guided discussion, and the use of ICT. In a few schools, while it was clear that appropriate methodologies were in use, minimal emphasis was placed on their

*“Teaching approaches are suitably varied and are deployed to meet the needs of the particular pupils attending this school. Pupils are encouraged to participate through the use of active learning methodologies and teachers report that they now place less emphasis on textbooks than previously.”*

Inspector’s quote

identification in the planning documents. It was evident that where teaching methodologies were included in individual teachers’ preparation, these translated into focused practice in the classroom. In these instances, pupils were actively involved in their own learning, and there was evidence of group work, paired work, and teacher-directed approaches.

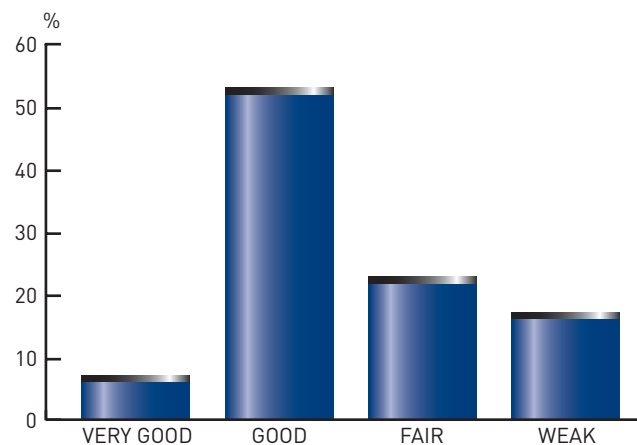
### Scope for development or experiencing difficulty

The use of a broad range of methodologies was rated “fair” in fewer than half the schools (27%), while a further 17% were rated “weak.” While there was evidence of an awareness of the value of employing a wide range of methodologies among teachers in some of these schools as a result of whole-school planning, changes in practice had not occurred as a consequence. In most schools in this category teaching methodologies were not identified in the documents, and there was little or no guidance at whole-school level on how differentiated implementation of the curriculum should take place. In schools where practice was weak, there was a lack of reference to teaching methodologies in individual teachers’ preparation. In addition, there were difficulties in the extent to which whole-class teaching was the predominant methodology, without due engagement in differentiated teaching or collaborative learning experiences.

## 5.5 Active, participative learning

The inspectors reviewed how whole-school planning addressed the issue of active, participative learning and whether such approaches to learning were used in classrooms. Their findings are presented in Fig. 5.4.

Fig. 5.4: Active, participative learning



### Optimum level or competent practice

A few schools (7%) were rated “very good” in relation to planning for, and the provision of, active participative learning experiences for pupils; a further 53% were rated “good.” It was difficult to establish a direct link between whole-school planning and the quality of pupils’ experience in

schools. However, in the “very good” and “good” schools some teachers reported that whole-school planning related to curriculum change resulted in pupils being ‘much happier coming to school now’ and that they were ‘becoming more confident and independent.’ They stated that pupils enjoyed learning, they were actively engaged, and they demonstrated an enthusiasm and willingness to participate in lessons. The emphasis was no longer on having a ‘quiet class,’ and the teachers’ awareness of pupils’ needs had increased. Examples of good practice observed during classroom visits included pupils working in groups according to their ability, an emphasis on project work and on co-operative learning, reading for pleasure, and the use of the environment in teaching and learning.

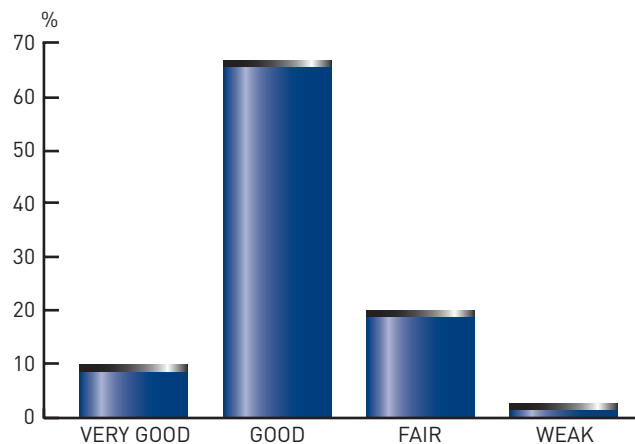
### Scope for development or experiencing difficulty

A small number of schools (23%) were rated as “fair” and a further 17% as “weak” in relation to planning for, and the provision of, active participative learning experiences for the pupils. Examples of practice found in these schools included failure to address active, participative methodologies in whole-school planning or in individual teachers’ preparation. In these schools whole-class teaching was the predominant methodology with only limited use of active participative learning. Where positive learning experiences were observed, practice was not consistent throughout the school but was confined to individual teachers.

## 5.6 Effective use of a wide range of material resources

The school's approach to the provision, management and effective use of material resources was explored by interviewing principals, teachers and chairpersons of boards of management and by reviewing school documents. In visits to classrooms, one of the issues the inspectors sought to examine was the extent to which whole-school planning had led to the effective use of a wide range of material resources in the areas identified by the school as priorities. Fig. 5.5 presents the findings.

Fig. 5.5: Effective use of a wide range of material resources



### Optimum level or competent practice

Most of the schools (77%) were rated positively in relation to the provision and use of material resources. A few of these schools (10%) exhibited “very good” practice, while the majority (67%) displayed “good” practice. Examples of effective practice were seen in the manner in which teachers had ready access to resources required for implementing the agreed priorities, and in the provision of school policies on the purchase, storage and maintenance of equipment. Further evidence gathered during school and classroom visits confirmed that the available materials were used effectively to enhance the learning experiences of pupils.

### Scope for development or experiencing difficulty

A small number of schools (20%) were rated “fair” in relation to the provision and effective use of material resources, and a further 3% were rated “weak.” While a few schools in this category had accumulated resources based on whole-school needs, and the availability of these resources was evidently linked to agreed priority areas, difficulties were identified where policy with regard to purchasing, accessing and stocktaking of resources was not comprehensive. Resources were acquired and effectively used by individual teachers in some schools in response to the needs of their own classes, rather than as a result of a whole-school policy.

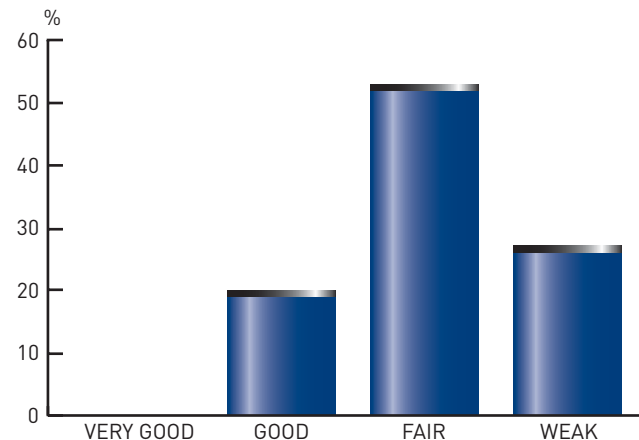
Another concern in relation to some of these schools was the fact that the resources were not used effectively. Other difficulties identified were problems associated with security and accessibility, the inadequate provision of material resources, and the continued use of textbooks as a dominant resource in the teaching process. Particular frustration was felt by teachers in a few schools where

arrangements had not been agreed for acquiring a suitable range of material resources to facilitate the implementation of the curriculum.

## 5.7 Improved attainment

Schools were asked to outline the strategies used by them to monitor attainment, particularly in those areas identified as priorities, as part of the planning process. The issue of improvements being specifically linked to school planning was explored. Where appropriate, records were examined to ascertain whether test results were monitored, reviewed and used as a basis for planning for improvement. Each school's reporting to the board of management of improved attainment by pupils in priority areas was investigated. Fig. 5.6 illustrates the inspectors' findings.

**Fig. 5.6:** Improved attainment





### Optimum level or competent practice

No school was rated “very good” at specifying a link between the whole-school planning process and improved attainment by pupils. Although schools reported that it was too soon to see evidence of improved attainment as a result of planning, a small number (20%) were considered “good” in this area. These schools had made some progress towards developing a systematic approach to monitoring outcomes within the framework of whole-school planning.

A number of examples of good practice were reported. These included developing a comprehensive policy on assessment, measuring attainment systematically, devising formats for plotting progress, and monitoring improvements in attendance. As a consequence of action taken in priority areas, positive changes in pupils’ behaviour and improved attendance were noted.

*“There is little evidence to suggest that [whole-school planning] has impacted with any degree of significance on teacher planning or on the day-to-day class teaching.”*

Inspector’s quote

### Scope for development or experiencing difficulty

Most schools (80%) were rated “fair” (53%) or “weak” (27%) in specifying a link between whole-school planning and improved attainment by pupils. In these schools, progress towards planning for improvement was limited. In some instances, formal policies on assessment or on monitoring pupils’ attainment had not been developed, and when formal assessment was carried out, the results were not processed, analysed and used to enhance pupils’ attainment in a whole-school manner. In other schools, teachers reported that improvements had occurred, but they could not provide tangible evidence to support this view, or they were unsure of the impact of planning on pupils’ attainment. In general, schools had not established systems for reporting improvements to the board of management.

## 5.8 Conclusions

Where schools were rated at optimum level or competent practice, this evaluation identified the following positive characteristics in relation to *outcomes*:

- Teachers attach a high level of value to whole-school planning.
- Teachers' professional development is advanced through discussion at staff meetings, involvement in planning activities, and engagement in teamwork and collaboration.
- Whole-school planning increases collegiality among teachers and leads to greater awareness of the breadth of curriculum areas.
- Where schools have identified a wide range of teaching methodologies in their planning documents, this translates effectively into practice.
- Teachers report that whole-school planning related to curriculum change has resulted in pupils engaging more positively in their learning.
- As a result of whole-school planning, teachers used material resources effectively to support implementation of the curriculum.

Where schools were rated at scope for development or experiencing difficulty, concerns related to *outcomes* were characterised by the following features:

- Awareness of the concept and value of whole-school planning is not always reflected in practice.
- Boards of management and parents have only a limited familiarity with the concept of whole-school planning as a tool for improvement.

- The link between curriculum planning and practice with regard to teaching and learning is not being made.
- Schools report that it is too soon to see evidence of improved outcomes for pupils as a result of whole-school planning.
- Most schools have yet to establish a link between whole-school planning and improved outcomes for pupils.
- In general, schools have not established systems for reporting improvements linked to whole-school planning to boards of management.

### Some questions for reflection


To what extent is the whole-school planning process linked to school improvement?

To what extent is teachers' professional development enhanced through the whole-school planning process?

To what extent are teaching methodologies discussed in the process of planning and identified in planning documents, within the context of curriculum change?

To what extent are improved outcomes for pupils, resulting from areas given priority for development, monitored, evaluated, and recorded?





## **6. Findings and recommendations**



# 6. Findings and recommendations

## 6.1 Introduction

This section presents the main findings and recommendations of the evaluation of whole-school planning in a sample of schools. The evaluation identified how effectively these primary schools achieve continuous improvement by engaging in self-review, by planning, and by taking action to build on their strengths and to address their weaknesses. Quality indicators were devised to evaluate three aspects of planning – *inputs*, *processes*, and *outcomes* – and these facilitated the collection of data by inspectors in thirty schools.

Despite the small scale of the study, it revealed important information regarding schools' engagement in the whole-school planning process. Analysis of the data illustrates progress in aspects of whole-school planning and identifies areas of concern.

## 6.2 Main evaluation findings

### 6.2.1 Inputs

It is evident that a wide variety of external supports is used effectively by schools to support planning. External personnel facilitate whole-school review and guide planning, and structured frameworks are effectively used. The report identifies scope for development related to some schools that are not yet making sufficient use of the external supports available.

The positive contribution of principals and other teachers who lead the planning process internally is acknowledged. Formal structures, such as the allocation of time for planning, and regular meetings, enable whole-school planning to take place systematically. However, it is apparent that members of the boards of management and parents do not play an active role in whole-school planning activities and that in some schools the responsibility for planning remains with the principal.

While professional development support is provided for teachers through a number of agencies, the practice of individual schools supporting the attendance of their teachers at activities related to areas given priority for development needs to be systematically addressed at a policy level. In some schools, the board of management cited lack of funding as inhibiting their ability to support professional development activities of this nature.

### 6.2.2 Processes

Most teachers collaborate to some extent in the process of whole-school planning and work towards agreed goals. Collaboration occurs through cluster groups, at staff meetings, on planning teams, and on in-service days. Teachers display awareness and understanding of priority areas for development, and they reach agreement on these areas using a variety of models.

School-based structures to accommodate the systematic and continuous involvement of parents and board members in the planning process have not yet been established in most schools. Where members of the board of management or parents play a role, their involvement is largely confined to policies that deal with the organisational aspects of school life. Members of boards of management



cite a lack of knowledge and expertise as an impediment to their involvement in planning, while parents do not see themselves as having a role in planning for curriculum provision. It is evident that further progress is required with regard to including members of boards of management and parents in the collaborative planning process. The comments made by board members and parents in this regard are instructive and suggest that further clarity is needed on the extent to which these partners should be engaged in organisational and curriculum policy-making. Consideration should be given to providing boards of management and parents with good practice guidelines on taking part in the school development planning process.

Teachers in many schools are committed to whole-school planning, and work on priority areas is guided effectively by principals, post-holders and teachers assuming leadership roles. However, priorities for development have yet to be identified in some schools, while in most schools the process of writing formal action plans is not embedded in the school plan. In a third of the schools in the sample, curriculum plans are not monitored or reviewed regularly. These findings give cause for concern, in that in these schools, whole-school planning may be viewed as an end in itself rather than as a tool for managing change and for school improvement.

### 6.2.3 Outcomes

Most of the evaluative statements made by the inspectors suggest that teachers attach a high level of value to whole-school planning. However, this value is not always reflected in their practice. Furthermore, boards of management and parents have only a limited familiarity with the concept of whole-school planning as a tool for improvement.

It was found that teachers' collegiality, professional development and awareness of the breadth of the curriculum are advanced through the whole-school planning process. Teachers value opportunities to engage in discussion during staff meetings and to work on teams. Principals and teachers in small schools value the support received through networking and through cluster groups. Inadequate in-school structures and procedures impede professional development in some schools.

Where school plans have identified a wide range of teaching methodologies to support curriculum delivery, a positive effect on practice is noticed, and teachers report that pupils are actively involved in their own learning and positively disposed towards it. One of the beneficial outcomes of effective whole-school planning is that teachers now have ready access to appropriate material resources, which they use effectively to support learning. In schools where engagement in whole-school planning is limited, significant issues have yet to be addressed. The evaluation reveals a concern that in about half the schools, teaching methodologies are not included in whole-school or individual teachers' planning. In these schools, there tends to be a reliance on whole-class teaching and on the use of textbooks, and not enough guidance is offered at whole-school level on differentiated teaching. Moreover, policies in relation to material resources have not been devised. It is a matter of concern that most schools are unclear about the link between whole-school planning, classroom practice, and improved outcomes for pupils.

## 6.3 Recommendations

- The School Development Planning Support (SDPS) service should conduct an audit of schools' engagement in whole-school planning, with a view to providing differentiated support to school staffs that have not yet taken responsibility for progressing their planning processes. Targets for engagement should be set by these schools, with support from the SDPS. Where such schools are identified by the Inspectorate in the course of whole-school evaluation or thematic evaluations, the school should be formally directed towards the SDPS for support.
- Models of good practice that provide guidance on effective internal school structures to ensure continuous commitment to whole-school planning and to rigorous self-evaluation should be documented by the SDPS and disseminated to schools. These models should illustrate how school development planning can be used as a tool for managing change and for school improvement, and schools should be encouraged to pay particular attention to the monitoring and evaluation stages of the process.
- Support services such as Leadership Development for Schools should continue to work in partnership with SDPS. Differentiated support should be provided where the leadership role of the principal and the concept of distributed or shared leadership is not yet fully understood or practised. WSE or thematic evaluations should include reference to these matters and should make recommendations regarding the sources from which follow-up support can be accessed.

- The education centre network, in conjunction with national support services, should conduct regular reviews to ascertain the professional development needs of schools and teachers and to co-ordinate and facilitate the provision of appropriate programmes in response. Programmes should also take account of relevant recommendations contained in WSE and thematic evaluation reports, which should be communicated to the education centres by schools.
- In the interests of ensuring the co-ordinated provision of support for schools, the Department of Education and Science should initiate planning for a unified professional development support structure for primary schools. This support structure should have the capacity to respond to the identified needs of schools in a cohesive manner. The establishment of such a structure should follow the completion of phased support for the implementation of the Primary School Curriculum, now in its penultimate year.
- The Department of Education and Science should establish a working party to hold consultations with the education partners and to draft protocols that would clarify the role and responsibilities of each of the partner groups in the whole-school planning process. Appropriate school structures to facilitate this engagement should be included. The School Development Planning Initiative should assist in the preparation of these protocols, which would incorporate exemplars of good practice. A programme of training should be provided for all board members as a follow-up to this work.

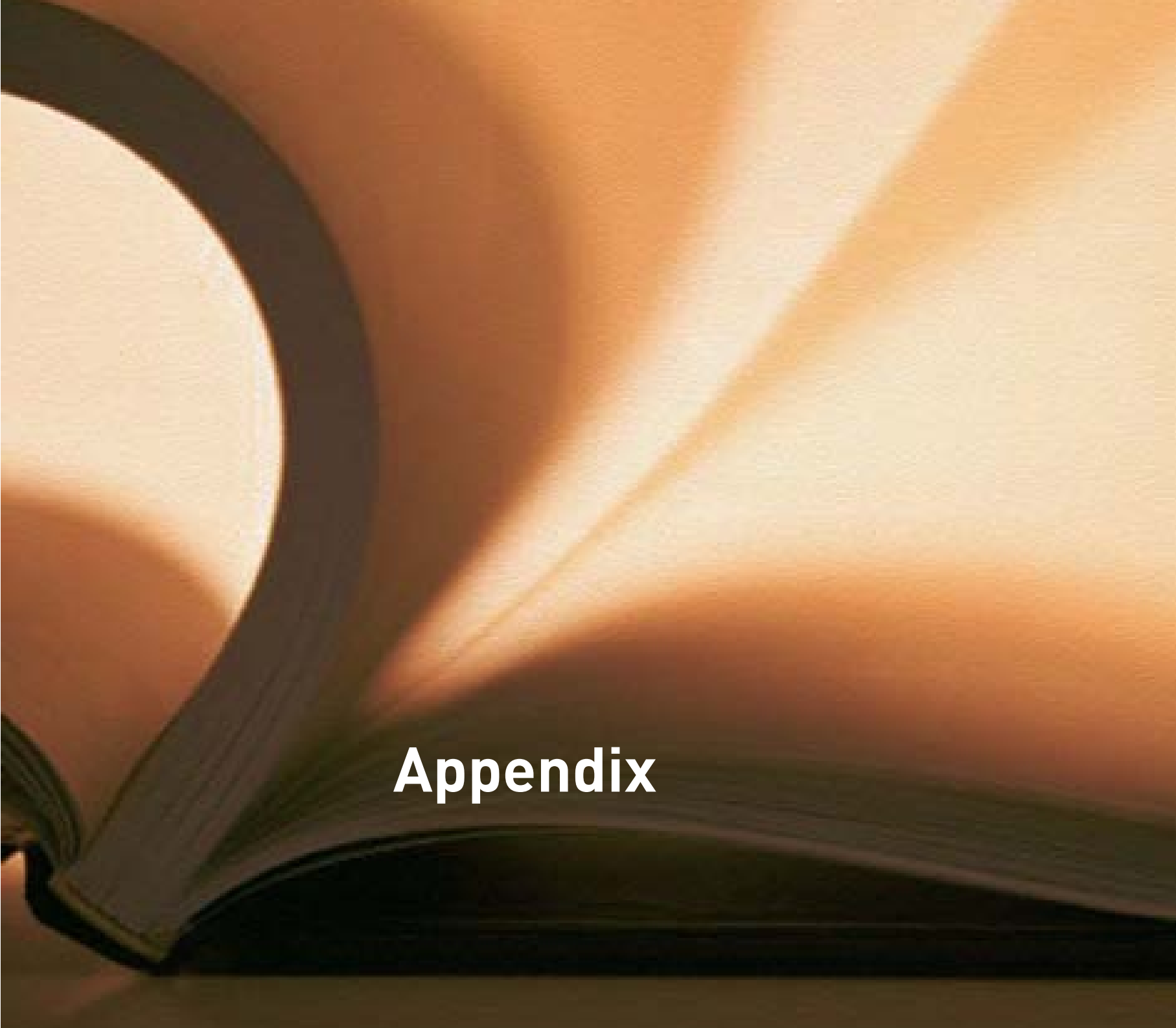
- All those who are concerned with providing funding, training and support for schools should address, subject to their particular remit, the lack of connection between whole-school planning and improved outcomes for pupils. In this regard, teachers' level of awareness of whole-school planning as a continuous school improvement process needs to be further developed.

## 6.4 Conclusion

The challenge of achieving continuous improvement through whole-school planning remains. As part of an integrated school evaluation policy, a rigorous system of school self-review needs to emerge. Critically, the entire process must have improved outcomes for pupils as its primary purpose. Whole-school planning provides a mechanism that links all schools' activities to this purpose.

The conclusions of this report show that schools are incrementally becoming more familiar with whole-school planning and its associated benefits. Future supports will need to concentrate on assisting schools in using whole-school planning as a tool for managing change. In this regard, it will be of particular importance: that schools will become skilled in the cycle of whole-school planning and so develop the “know-how” for managing any new initiative, that capacity-building strategies involving the principal, the in-school management team and teachers be employed, and that protocols for the involvement of boards of management and parents be developed.





# Appendix

# Appendix

## Interview questions

Quality indicator	Principal/Planning Coordinators	Teachers
Awareness of concept of whole school planning	How familiar are you with the idea of whole school planning? What is the value of it? To what extent has WSP been a support to you?	How familiar are you with the idea of whole school planning? What is the value of it? To what extent has WSP been a support to your teaching?
Collaboration	Who takes part in the planning process/planning days? Do participants from the school work as one group?	To what extent have you been involved in drafting the whole school plan?
Action focused on school improvement	Has a whole-school review taken place? When? Have priorities for development been established? What are the current priorities? Why were they chosen? Did you work on other priorities? What action plans have been prepared? Are arrangements in place for monitoring progress in priority areas? What are they?	What are the priorities that were identified? If an action plan was agreed upon, can you specify how successfully it has operated up to now?



Board of Management	Parents
<p>In your opinion what are the priorities facing the school which can be tackled via the planning process? Are there any issues in relation to planning in the school?</p>	<p>Do you think what parents have to say is taken seriously by the school? Have you examples of when this has happened? What school policies do you know about – list or Do you know if your school has a policy on things like homework or bullying? Were parents asked to get involved in any way when these policies were being talked about?</p>
<p>Do you or members of the BOM participate in the planning process in the school? Are you aware of any parental involvement in the planning process in the school?</p>	<p>Do you think the school asks parents to get involved enough? What would you like the school to ask your opinion about? Do most parents know what's happening in the school? How do they find out?</p>
<p>Does the BOM have a say in identifying priorities for development? Does the BOM ratify each completed policy? Were/are there any areas of concern regarding school's planning decisions at BOM level?</p>	<p>Do you feel that school planning has helped parents to be more involved in school life? Has that made a difference?</p>

Quality indicator	Principal/Planning Coordinators	Teachers
<p>Systematic, ongoing commitment</p>	<p>Have planning teams/committees been formed?            Have individuals been given responsibility for whole school planning or aspects of WSP? Who?            Are participants committed to undertaking improvements in the agreed areas? In what way? Is the process of planning for improvement a continuous one? In what way (frequency of meetings, monitoring)?            Who guides/supports the process (internally/externally)? Does the school network with other/similar schools for planning? Are documents from SDP /PCSP and/or other sources available and effectively used as a basis for planning and if so to what extent?            Have strategic plans (outline or general plan) been prepared?</p>	<p>Do you have ready access to a copy of the school plan?            Is the process continuing and, if so, in what way?</p>

Board of Management	Parents
<p>Are structures in place to enable continuous engagement in planning activities on a regular basis in the future?</p>	<p>Would you /will you be involved in planning and developing new policies for the school (if you had the chance)? How would you get involved in this? What do you think the school could do to get parents more involved?</p>

Quality indicator	Principal/Planning Coordinators	Teachers
Characteristic spirit	<p>Do you have an agreed mission/vision statement? Who was involved in defining this? Can you specify what the main features are?</p> <p>Have you written an agreed set of general aims for the school?</p>	<p>If a mission/vision statement has been agreed, can you specify what the main features are?</p>
Professional development	<p>Have changes occurred in attitudes and approaches to planning in the school in recent years? In what way?</p> <p>Have teachers' attitudes changed in any way as a result of planning? In what way?</p> <p>Does teachers' individual written planning reflect agreed priorities?</p>	<p>To what extent has the process of whole school planning been worthwhile? What, in brief, were the obstacles and difficulties that you and colleagues encountered?</p>
Effective provision and use of a wide range of material resources	<p>Has whole school planning led to improvements in the provision of resources to classes? How? Evidence</p>	<p>To what extent have you introduced a range of material resources on foot of the whole school planning process? Refer specifically to the targeted area.</p>

Board of Management	Parents
<p>Is the BOM agreed on what constitutes the characteristic spirit of the school? Has the BOM communicated this to the school community?</p>	
<p>Has the BOM engaged outside speakers on planning to upskill its members? Have changes occurred at BOM level in attitudes and approaches to planning in the school in recent years? In what way? Why? Does the BOM finance professional development in the school?</p>	
<p>Has the BOM provided resources deemed necessary by teachers for planning purposes?</p>	

Quality indicator	Principal/Planning Coordinators	Teachers
Effective use of a broad range of methodologies/differentiated approaches	<p>Have changes occurred in teaching methodology due to planning? At what class levels(s) is this most evident? Can you give examples? Why were these changes necessary? Who decided they were necessary? How were new methodologies introduced? Who provided staff development? Who guided/supported?</p> <p>How are the effects of changes in methodology monitored? By whom?</p>	<p>To what extent has the whole school planning influenced your planning and general approach in the classroom? Please specify.</p>
Active and participative learning	<p>Have pupils' learning experiences improved? In what way? Evidence? How are the effects of changes in methodology monitored? By whom?</p>	<p>In what way have pupils' classroom experiences improved due to the WSP process? Please specify.</p>
Monitoring improved attainment	<p>Has the school monitored improvements in attainment in prioritised areas? To what extent are improvements in attainment attributable to whole school planning?</p>	<p>To what extent has whole school planning contributed to an improvement in pupil attainment? Please illustrate with example(s). How do you know?</p>

Board of Management	Parents
	<p>What does your child tell you about what happens/goes on in school?            What do you think makes him/her feel good about school?            Is there anything that makes him /her feel bad or negative about school?</p>
<p>Are improvements reported to BOM?</p>	

