



An Chomhairle Náisiúnta Eacnamaíoch agus Shóisialta
National Economic & Social Council

Quality and Standards in Human Services in Ireland: The School System

No. 129 August 2012

National Economic and Social Council

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Abbreviations

AfL Assessment for Learning	FÁS Foras Áiseanna Saothair	LAOS Looking at Our School
AMCSS Association of Management of Catholic Secondary Schools	HEA Higher Education Authority	LCA Leaving Certificate Applied
BOM Board of Management	HR Human Resource	MAC Management Advisory Committee
CEO Chief Executive Officer	HSE Health Service Executive	MORI Market & Opinion Research International
CPD Continuous Professional Development	IBEC Irish Business and Employers Confederation	NCCA National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
CP SMA Catholic Primary School Management Association	ICT Information and Communications Technology	NCSE National Council for Special Education
DEIS Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools	ICTU Irish Congress of Trade Unions	NESC National Economic and Social Council
DES Department of Education and Skills	IEC International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement	NEWB National Educational Welfare Board
DPR Drumcondra Primary Reading	ISA Irish School Heads' Association	NFQ National Framework of Qualifications
DPMT Drumcondra Primary Maths Tests	ITE Initial Teacher Education	NGOs Non-Governmental Organisations
ECCE Early Childhood Care and Education	JCSP Junior Certificate School Programme	NPC National Parents' Council Primary
ERC Educational Research Centre	JMB Joint Managerial Body	NPCpp National Parents' Council Post-primary
		NQA National Qualifications Authority of Ireland

OECD

Organisation for
Economic Co-
operation and
Development

ORP

Organisational Review
Programme

PBU

Planning and Building
Unit

P&D

Performance &
Development

PDST

Professional
Development Support
for Teachers

PIRLS

Progress in
International Reading
Literacy Study

PISA

Programme of
International Student
Assessment

PBU

Planning and Building
Unit

QCAP

Qualifications,
Curriculum and
Assessment Policy
Unit

SDPI

School Development
Planning Initiative

SNA

Special Needs
Assistants

SSP

School Support
Programme

TIMSS

Trends in International
Mathematics and
Science Study

VECs,

Vocational Education
Committees

WSE

Whole School
Evaluation

WSE-MLL

Whole-School
Evaluation-
Management,
Leadership and
Learning

WTE

Whole Time
Equivalent

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This report on quality and standards in the Irish school system describes the considerable institutional developments which have taken place in the school system over the last fifteen years or so. During this time the school system has experienced the implementation of an unprecedented amount of new legislation and the establishment of an array of specialist agencies who are responsible for standards, quality and accountability in primary and post-primary education.

The Department of Education and Skills (DES) sets the legislative and regulatory environment that provides the operating context for schools, and together with the specialist agencies, provides the foundation for a broad regulatory framework within which schools and teachers respond and adapt to the needs of their pupils. The main actors driving the regulatory standards and quality improvement regime in the school system today includes the DES; DES Inspectorate Division; Teaching Council; National Council for Curriculum and Assessment; National Education and Welfare Board; National Council for Special Education; School Boards of Management; Parent Councils, Student Councils.

A recent addition to the school system has been the establishment of the Teaching Council with its comprehensive range of responsibilities from accreditation of initial teacher education and continuing professional development programmes, to issues relating to teaching competency and fitness to practice. These developments are potentially significant to the achievement of standards and quality improvements in schools.

Ireland's approach to quality assurance takes place through external inspection by the DES Inspectorate, supported by school self evaluation. Over the past decade, schools have had to undertake a process of self-evaluation known as Looking at Our School (LAOS) which sets out a framework against which both primary and post-primary schools are measured and reviewed. The LAOS framework was designed to support self evaluation in schools, and so was not prescriptive. In practice, school self evaluation has been largely confined to the production of school policy documents. It is often seen as a once-off exercise rather than an ongoing process to support self reflection and school improvement. In addition, it is not linked to any external benchmarks or performance criteria. This leads to the conclusion that until regular evaluation and review become part of every day teaching, the benefits of each process and potential synergies of the combined processes will continue to be lost to the school system.

The DES also launched a Whole School Evaluation (WSE) initiative in 1996, which was eventually introduced into schools in 2003/4, following a number of years of negotiation. WSE is a process of external evaluation of the work of a school carried out by the DES Inspectorate Division. A school evaluation under WSE includes a

range of activities and meetings involving the school principal, teachers, members of parent's councils/associations and members of the school's Boards of Management. It also comprises school and classroom visits by the inspector during which they observe in classrooms and interact with students and their teachers. During these visits the inspectors examine school planning documentation and teachers' written preparation. At the end of the process a draft report is prepared by the inspection team and a series of post inspection meetings take place with the school principal and staff, and representatives of the board of management. The WSE report is then finalised and issued to the school.

Over time accountability concerns have motivated a number of developments such as unannounced inspections in primary and post-primary schools, and a greater emphasis on school management, leadership and learning in post-primary schools. Accountability concerns have also motivated changes in the function of school Boards of Management (BOMs) in relation to the performance of individual teachers, and BOMs are statutorily obliged to address underperformance. As BOMs are largely made up of volunteers there is an ongoing issue about the capacity of some BOMs to fulfil these additional responsibilities.

Assessment also plays an important role in providing a quality learning and school experience for students. Assessment can take place at two levels: assessment of learning through State examinations such as the Junior Certificate and the Leaving Certificate; and assessment for learning which are school based assessments designed to test student's abilities and performance on an ongoing basis so that timely adjustments can be made, as necessary. This is akin to the difference between a 1500m runner being told only his or her final finish time, compared to being told each of his or her lap times so that they can adjust their pace during the race.

Ireland's recent performance in an international assessment, known as the Programme of International Student Assessment (PISA), has fuelled concerns that the fundamental educational capacities of Irish students may be declining and has led to a number of developments, including the introduction of a National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy. The literacy and numeracy strategy commits the DES to a programme of helping schools to benchmark themselves against their equivalents and set targets for improvement. Curriculum reform is also on the agenda as anxieties have been expressed about how well schooling prepares students for self-directed learning and critical thinking.

Overall, this is an impressive array of developments and could signal real change in the Irish school system. However, the implications of these developments can be understood in two ways. One could take the view that many important changes to the school system have been completed and that this will now result in greater oversight, accountability and improvement. Alternatively, it could be argued that important as these changes are, further work needs to be done to ensure that these novel developments bear fruit in terms of better schooling and educational outcomes.

Analysis of the developments of the past decade that is informed by international thinking on quality and accountability suggests that there still remains some way to

go in building a system of quality and continuous improvement within schools in Ireland. This is because, notwithstanding the many developments described in this report, there are some critical areas which require attention and development, two of which are especially important: (i) the general absence of a culture and discipline of reflective practice within schools based upon relatively objective evidence rather than subjective impressions; and (ii) the absence of a national data and standards framework, which provides a sound basis for judgement about quality and improvement. Processes of internal review within classrooms and schools need some external standards of quality and performance as a yardstick for benchmarking. And external standards of excellence are of limited use if they are not used to impel deeper, diagnostic enquiry into why certain problems of teaching and learning are manifesting themselves and how they might be ameliorated.

The DES has given notice of the importance of education stakeholders moving 'beyond the traditional responses that seek to protect and maintain the status quo in terms of structures and resources in particular areas or in simply looking for more resources'. The Department also notes that it has a 'role in ensuring the availability of analysis to inform such considerations (Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, 2012: 203). What this role might be and what kind of analysis might support a transition beyond the *status quo* has yet to be articulated. Perhaps a good place to start would be to probe the issues raised in this report, primarily those pertaining to stimulating continuous professional review and improvement of teaching, and the building of a national data and standards framework to support such processes.

Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Background

This report on the role of standards and quality improvement initiatives in the Irish school system, specifically primary and post-primary schools, is one of a series. It is part of a NESC project that is concerned with how regulation and standards can best contribute to good-quality, continuously improving human services. In December 2011, NESC published the first report in the series, entitled *Quality and Standards in Human Services in Ireland: Overview of Concepts and Practice*. It provides a review of approaches to regulation, standards-setting, and continuous improvement: from a conceptual viewpoint, from international experience and from recent experience in Ireland. Other reports that comprise this project review the role of standards and quality improvement initiatives in eldercare, end-of-life care, disability and policing. As well as this report on schools and these other reports, the project will culminate in the publication of a synthesis report, drawing together the conclusions from all of the individual reports.

The primary focus of the project is on what influences quality and ongoing improvement in human services provision, with an emphasis on the role of standards and systems of accountability. Quality services have been defined as the extent to which service delivery and/or service outcomes meet the informed expectations and defined needs of the user (NESF, 2007: 3). Human services provided in this way are often referred to as ‘person-centred’ services and services ‘tailored’ to meet service users’ needs. Associated issues that occur in a review of quality service provision and standards relate to regulation, especially responsive regulation; the role of the service user; how services are organised; costs; and systematic learning from experiment and experience (NESC, 2011).

Since the *Overview of Concepts and Practice* report provides the context in which this report has been developed, it is useful to give a brief summary of the key issues and ideas that have emerged. These will be used at a later stage to assess what arrangements are in place for the achievement of quality outcomes in schools and how well they are working.

1.2 Responsive Regulation

Regulation is one of a number of quality-enhancing mechanisms that can improve the quality of services. The concept of responsive regulation arises from studies

indicating that regulation is not always effective when there are only two extreme options, which are ‘command and control’ (with rules and regulations implemented through a top-down approach directed by a central regulator), and ‘self-regulation’ (a bottom-up approach where service providers and professionals self-regulate). Responsive regulation instead aims to combine both approaches, and is often depicted as a regulatory pyramid of approaches, with self-regulation and voluntary approaches at the base and sanctions at the top (Braithwaite *et al.*, 2007). To ensure standards are met, the regulator or oversight organisation begins at the bottom of the pyramid with information provision and persuasion, but with the capacity to escalate towards punishment if persuasion fails, sometimes referred to as ‘the gorilla in the closet’. Regulators will seek to persuade, but will act further if matters do not improve.

This pyramid alone, however, does not capture sufficiently the importance of rewards to spur effective regulation. Therefore, Braithwaite has since developed a ‘strengths-based’ pyramid to complement the ‘regulatory’ pyramid, which promotes ‘virtue’ while the regulatory pyramid restrains ‘vice’ (Braithwaite, 2008). Standards as a tool for regulation are used differently and, rather than being pushed up through a floor as in the regulatory pyramid, are instead pulled up through a ceiling in the strengths-based model. This is similar to the distinction made by Seddon, who focuses on increasing purpose and *performance* in services rather than relying on compliance with regulations, and who sees frontline staff heavily involved in driving improvements (Seddon, 2008).

Overall, taking the two pyramids together, the focus is on continuous improvement, by identifying problems and fixing them, but also by identifying opportunities and developing them. The strength of this dual pyramid approach is at the bottom, where they are interconnected. This is where most of the activity takes place within the service delivery organisation, with limited support and/or intervention from external organisations, such as regulators and overseers (NESC, 2011).

A range of approaches can be taken within responsive regulation, two of which are particularly relevant to this study of school standards. One is meta-regulation, where organisations establish systems of self-regulation themselves, and regulators then seek to assure themselves that these systems are adequate and being followed, i.e., it is the regulation of self-regulation (NESC, 2011). This can be carried out within an overall guiding framework to promote quality. The second is ‘smart regulation’ (Gunningham & Grabosky, 1998), where a range of non-State bodies are involved in supporting regulation, for example, professional organisations, trade unions and NGOs. These groups may be able to act as ‘quasi-regulators’, for example, NGOs that provide supports to implement standards. It may be necessary, however, for the State to enforce such standards with organisations who do not respond to the persuasive work of the NGO or other third parties.

1.3 Involvement of Service Users

An increasing trend in the provision of human services is a focus on how the *service user* receives the service. This means growing references to ‘person-centred’ services¹ and ‘tailored services’.² There is greater emphasis on taking into account the views of service users through consultation, ongoing engagement and, in some cases, the co-production of services and associated standards, for example, through student councils, and parents’ associations. Associated with a greater emphasis on service users is an increasing focus on outcomes – for the service user, but also for the service providers, and the service system more widely (NESC, 2011).

1.4 Monitoring and Learning

Seeking feedback on the delivery and quality of services is a vital element of all quality assurance systems and is key to continuous improvement. What is needed is a mechanism for practitioners to learn from their practice and monitoring on an ongoing basis to ensure that review and learning, which can be described and demonstrated, are a constant feature of what people do at a local service delivery level (NESC, 2011; Sabel, C.F., 1994). According to Kendrick, monitoring and evaluation can point to the need for changes in service models where ‘They [quality and monitoring] are not in themselves capable of assuring quality, unless they are subsequently combined with feasible measures to improve service practice and models’ (Kendrick, 2006: 3).

A key message from all the evidence reviewed by NESC in its *Overview of Concepts and Practice* (2011) is the need for a learning culture in the provision of quality human services. Ideally, learning should take place at a number of levels: the level at which the service is delivered; at regional or sectoral level; and at the level of regulator or at national level. This approach is sometimes referred to as ‘triple-loop learning’. Diagnostic monitoring³ and other service-review approaches focus on asking ‘Why?’ in a systematic way with a view to sharing learning to change systems at the highest level.

¹ Person-centred services focus on the wishes of the service user in relation to the kind of services received and how they are delivered. This is the opposite of more ‘task-focused’ services that are often provided.

² This refers to mainstream services that have supports specifically tailored to the needs of the person accessing them, so that the person can overcome obstacles arising from disadvantaged social circumstances. See also NESC’s report on the Developmental Welfare State (NESC, 2005).

³ Monitoring of services, which is used to diagnose problems and find solutions.

1.5 Devolution with Accountability

There is some evidence from practice and in the literature that those who are delivering services directly to the service users know well what is required. Devolving responsibility to service providers to maintain quality, but with clear accountability mechanisms to ‘the centre’, can be an effective part of a regulatory system. The evidence suggests that a fruitful approach is to set a broad regulatory framework or a small number of guiding principles ‘at the centre’⁴ and then devolve their application to the local context. The centre continues to have an oversight role to ensure compliance but local providers have the opportunity, and in some cases, the incentive, to improve quality and performance. The over-riding priority is on achieving and improving outcomes for service users (NESC, 2011).

1.6 Cost Effectiveness

In the current economic climate cost is to the forefront of any debate about providing public services. The limited evidence that exists suggests that some quality approaches can reduce the cost of provision, for example, cutting out waste, changing the way we do things to make services more efficient and effective, and taking a person-centred approach. A corresponding perspective is that, in a context of budget reductions, similar strategies would need to be employed if quality is not to be jeopardised, i.e. if services are not to deteriorate when there are budget reductions (NESC, 2011).

1.7 Report Structure

This report focuses on the arrangements that are intended to drive standards, ensure accountability, and support the achievement of quality in the Irish school system. This includes primary and post-primary education up to the Leaving Certificate examination that takes place at the end of the Senior Cycle, and refers to students between 4 and 18 years of age. The report comprises the following chapters:

Chapter 1: which is this chapter, contains a summary of the key issues and ideas contained in the NESC *Quality and Standards in Human Services in Ireland: Overview of Concepts and Practice* (2011), which will be used later to analyse trends in the school system in Ireland; a description of the research methodology utilised in the writing of this report; a brief summary of the Irish education landscape, with

⁴ Depending on the context, ‘the centre’ can be government, a government department, a regulator etc. The important point is that power (to varying degrees) is devolved from a central to the local or ‘frontline’ context.

particular reference to the make-up of the Irish school system; and an outline of the current context and drivers for standards and accountability in Irish education.

Chapter 2: includes a description of legislation and regulation that is designed to support the achievement of standards and quality in the school system in Ireland; and an overview of a number of specialist agencies that have been established to support the Department of Education and Skills (DES) in its work.

Chapter 3: describes the roles of the DES, the Inspectorate and school Boards of Management, principals and teachers and the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment as prescribed by the Education Act 1998; and outlines the role of the Teaching Council in improving standards and accountability in the teaching profession.

Chapter 4: provides an overview of programmes of inspection and evaluation in primary and post-primary schools.

Chapter 5: looks at approaches to assessment and their role in the achievement of quality in learning outcomes, and at two national programmes, containing a strong emphasis on assessment and evaluation, operating in the Irish school system.

Chapter 6: presents an assessment of key questions posed in the NESC (2011) report, *Quality and Standards in Human Services in Ireland: Overview of Concepts and Practice* in relation to primary and post-primary education in Ireland and draws some conclusions in relation to the existing arrangements for quality and standards in the school system.

1.8 Methodology

The research methodology employed for this report consisted of a desk-based review of the legislative and oversight arrangements for the achievement of quality in the school system in Ireland and internationally; a series of one-to-one interviews with stakeholders within the school system; and a focus group workshop, attended by stakeholder representatives, where the key themes and issues that had been identified through the desk-based review and the one-to-one interviews were explored (see Box 1.1).

Box 1.1 Stakeholders Interviewed on Standards in the School System

Department of Education and Science – Chief Inspector and Deputy Chief Inspector

Catholic Primary School Management Association

Joint Managerial Body

National Parents’ Council Primary

National Parents’ Council Post-primary

The Teaching Council

Educational Research Centre

Irish National Teachers’ Organisation

Association of Secondary Teachers in Ireland

Teachers’ Union of Ireland

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment

National Education Welfare Board

1.9 Education in Ireland

Education is considered a fundamental right under the Irish constitution. Attendance at full-time education is compulsory for all children in Ireland from the ages of six to sixteen or until students have completed three years of second level, including one sitting of the Junior Certificate examination.

Overall responsibility for education policy and for the administration of the education system in Ireland lies within DES. The mission of the DES is to provide high-quality education that enables individuals to achieve their full potential, to participate fully as members of society, and to contribute to Ireland’s social, cultural and economic development.

Among the Department’s stated priorities are the promotion of equity and inclusion, quality outcomes and lifelong learning; planning for education that is relevant to personal, social, cultural and economic needs; and enhancement of the capacity of the Department for service delivery, policy formulation, research and evaluation. Core tasks for the DES are inspection and evaluation of the quality of schools, advising on educational policy, and supporting teachers and school management.

All State primary and post-primary schools in Ireland must be inspected by the Department of Education and Skills. The purpose of inspection is to ensure that high standards are maintained and that there is continuing development of the educational system. The Department has a special division called the Inspectorate, which works to achieve these objectives. The role and responsibilities of the Inspectorate are described later in Section 3.1.

The Irish education system was traditionally divided into three levels: primary (8 years duration), secondary (5-6 years duration) and higher education which offered a wide range of opportunities from post-secondary courses, to vocational and technical training, to full degree and the highest post-graduate levels. In recent years, the education system has been expanded to include pre-school education,⁵ and adult and further education, as the concept of lifelong learning becomes reflected in the educational opportunities available within the Irish education system.

Unlike education systems in other countries, the Irish education system does not have a shared over-arching vision and articulated aims⁶, and this can be said to limit the potential effectiveness of strategic planning within the DES. The absence of a vision for education in Ireland was highlighted in the government's *Third Report of the Organisational Review Programme* (Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, 2012), which states:

In particular there is a need to articulate a vision for the education system which will integrate, prioritise and sequence the issues to be tackled in the short-term and those which will be progressed in the medium-to longer-term (*ibid.*: 17).

However, the Irish education system is not without a philosophical rationale and statements of aims, for example, those contained in *Charting our Education Future-White Paper on Education* (Department of Education and Science, 1995), which sets out a statement of educational aims as a basis for active reflection by stakeholders, as a guide to policy formation, and as guidelines for inclusion in the daily practices of teaching and learning in schools and colleges (see Box 1.2).

⁵ Responsibility for State provision of early childhood education (up to the age of 4 years) rests with the Department of Children and Youth Affairs while State provision for the period 4 to 5 years generally takes place in primary schools and comes under the remit of the Department of Education and Skills.

⁶ For example, Finland's vision for education since 1970 has been to provide all citizens with equal opportunities to receive a good education of their choice, irrespective of their age, domicile, socio-economic situation, gender or mother tongue.

Box 1.2 Educational Aims in Ireland

To foster an understanding and critical appreciation of the values - moral, spiritual, religious, social and cultural-- which have been distinctive in shaping Irish society and which have been traditionally accorded respect in society.

To nurture a sense of personal identity, self-esteem and awareness of one's particular abilities, aptitudes and limitations, combined with a respect for the rights and beliefs of others.

To promote quality and equality for all, including those who are disadvantaged, through economic, social, physical and mental factors, in the development of their full educational potential.

To develop intellectual skills combined with a spirit of inquiry and the capacity to analyse issues critically and constructively.

To develop expressive, creative and artistic abilities to the individual's full capacity.

To foster a spirit of self-reliance, innovation, initiative and imagination.

To promote physical and emotional health and well-being.

To provide students with the necessary education and training to support the country's economic development and to enable them to make their particular contribution to society in an effective way.

To create tolerant, caring and politically aware members of society.

To ensure that Ireland's young people acquire a keen awareness of their national and European heritage and identity, coupled with a global awareness and a respect and care for the environment.

Source Charting our Education Future - White Paper on Education, Department of Education and Science (1995)

The DES also articulates its mission that is to provide high-quality education that will enable individuals to achieve their full potential and to participate fully as members of society and contribute to Ireland's social, cultural and economic development. The DES has identified the following five strategic goals to support the achievement of this mission:

- To promote equity and inclusion;
- To promote quality outcomes;
- To promote lifelong learning;
- To plan for education that is relevant to personal, social, cultural and economic needs; and
- To enhance the capacity of the Department of Education and Skills for service delivery, policy formulation, research and evaluation.

In the past, Ireland's education system operated in an environment with a very limited amount of legislation. The legislation included the School Attendance Act 1926, and the Vocational Education Act 1930. Revisions, amendments and updates to the Acts and/or the Rules for both primary and post-primary schools were, and still are, communicated to schools via Departmental Circulars.

This situation has changed significantly during the last fifteen years or so with the enactment of a range of new legislation and guidelines, and the establishment of a number of key agencies, which support the work of the DES in the adaptation and implementation of legislative requirements and the delivery of services (see Box 1.3). These regulatory instruments and specialist agencies will be described in greater detail later in this report.

Box 1.3 Legislation and Specialist Agencies

Legislation

The Education Act 1998

Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2000

Education (Welfare) Act 2000

The Teaching Council Act 2001

Vocational Education Amendment Act 2001

Specialist Agencies

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (2001)

The National Qualifications Authority (2001)

The National Educational Welfare Board (2002)

The State Examinations Commission (2003)

The National Council for Special Education (2003)

The Teaching Council (2006)

1.10 The Irish School System

The Irish primary school sector consists of State-funded primary schools, special schools and private primary schools. In 2010 the primary sector comprised approximately 32,000 teachers in 3,305 schools accommodating approximately 500,000 children (Department of Education and Skills, 2011a). The primary school sector also comprises a large number of small rural schools.

The post-primary education sector comprises State-funded secondary, vocational, community and comprehensive schools. These schools provide Certificate courses prescribed by the Department of Education and Skills, and enter their students for the same national examinations. There were in the region of 26,000 second-level teachers and 350,000 students attending 729 second-level schools during 2010 (*ibid.*).

This post-primary sector also includes the *Youthreach* centres for education. *Youthreach* is an inter-departmental initiative. These centres are a State-funded alternative education provision for students who drop out of school early. Participants are generally aged between 15 and 20 years and have left schools with less than 5Ds in the Junior Certificate, or without having attempted the Leaving Certificate. They provide the equivalent of second-level education and are managed under the auspices of the Vocational Education Committees. There are 76 Youthreach centres, 47 Community Training centres funded by FÁS, 6 Department of Justice Workshops funded by FÁS and the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, and 28 Traveller Training centres operating throughout the country, catering in total for over 6,000 trainees (DES website, <http://www.education.ie>, 17/05/12).

State-funded schools include religious schools, non-denominational schools, multi-denominational schools and Gaelscoileanna. The vast majority of primary and post-primary schools are privately owned and supported by different religious denominations. The State pays the building and running costs while a local contribution is also made towards the running costs. In the case of Catholic and Church of Ireland Schools, the owners are usually the diocesan trustees. Other denominational schools normally have a Board of Trustees nominated by the church authorities. Multi-denominational schools are usually owned by a limited company or Board of Trustees. Gaelscoileanna may be denominational and come under the same patronage as Catholic schools but some are operate under the patronage of a limited company.⁷

Schools are managed at local level by a Board of Management (BOM), which is appointed by the patron or trustee of the school. BOMs are responsible for the employment and management of all school staff. (The roles and responsibilities of

⁷ Citizens Information, http://citizensinformation.ie/en/education/primary_post_primary_education, 19/10/2011).

school boards will be described in more detail later in Section 3.23.2) Both primary and post-primary schools are subject to inspection by the DES.

The arrangements for standards, quality and accountability in the school system in Ireland are captured in Figure 1.1.

Figure 1.1 Standards and Accountability Arrangements in Primary and Post-Primary Education in Ireland



1.11 Current Context

The Department of Education and Skills operates in a highly diverse and challenging environment. There is a widespread consensus that improving standards, quality and accountability is necessary to improve educational outcomes for the individual, society and the economy, and that education has a critical role to play in Ireland's economic recovery. Clearly the current economic climate, in particular the scale of public debt, poses severe challenges to the DES as the requirement to reduce public expenditure must also be balanced with the importance of delivering a quality education system to underpin future economic growth and an inclusive society.

At European level, education has an important place in the integrated guidelines for delivering the revised Lisbon Strategy for jobs and growth among EU member states. A central theme of the EU commitment to a coherent strategy for social inclusion is to ensure that all young people leave the education system with a high-quality education and related qualifications to enable them to achieve their full potential and support their full participation in society and the economy.

1.11.1 Public Sector Reform Agenda

At the heart of the Government's public service reform agenda, that was launched in November 2011, are five major commitments to change, which together are designed to improve performance, quality and accountability in the provision of human services. These commitments focus on the following areas:

- Placing customer service at the core of everything we do;
- Maximising new and innovative service delivery channels;
- Radically reducing costs to drive better value for money;
- Leading, organising and working in new ways; and
- A strong focus on implementation and delivery.

There is a strong emphasis throughout the Public Service Reform Plan on performance measurement and accountability, at both organisational and individual level (Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, 2011).

1.11.2 Organisational Review Programme

The DES is one of four government departments to be included in the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform's *Third Report of the Organisational Review Programme* (Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, 2012). While the report acknowledges the general consensus across a diverse group of stakeholders and domestic and international observers that the Irish education system is a good and cost-effective model, it also identifies a number of capacity issues that need to

be addressed so that the DES can facilitate the achievement of its strategic goals with greater efficiency. These capacity issues are outlined in Box 1.4 below.

1.11.3 International Benchmarks of Education Outcomes

Education has been seen as central to Ireland's social and economic development since the 1960s. During the last ten years, policy has focused on the importance of the role of education in building a 'knowledge economy' and enhancing social inclusion. However, a number of recently published reports have highlighted a worrying trend in the levels of literacy and numeracy among Irish students.

The levels of attainment in literacy and numeracy in Ireland were highlighted in the OECD's *Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) Report 2009*, (OECD, 2010) which indicated that there has been a decline (as measured by PISA) in the relative performance of Irish fifteen-year-olds in reading literacy and mathematics. In 2009, Ireland ranked 17th in reading literacy and 26th in mathematics of 34 OECD countries, compared with 5th in 2000 for reading literacy and 17th in mathematics in 2003.⁸ The report also makes the point that not all of the decline took place in the latest PISA round and that a sizeable fall in reading literacy scores had already taken place between 2000 and 2003. Research reviews from the Irish Educational Research Centre rules out a number of factors for the changes in performance: such as sample design, achieved samples of schools and students, and the quality of national versions of the assessment instruments and procedures used to administer the tests (Perkins *et al.*, 2010). Finn (2012) also identifies the need for a cautious approach to the data and its interpretation, commenting that a sole focus on rank performance can be misleading and fails to contextualise the results. Finn argues that a more nuanced consideration of the data suggests that while Ireland is not among the top performers in PISA, that overall Ireland's performance has been at the same level as many other Western European countries (Finn, 2012).

⁸ 2009 scores are compared with scores for the year in which the 'domain' i.e. reading literacy, mathematics was previously considered.

Box 1.4 DES Capacity Issues

Strategy setting: The Department is excessively engaged in short-term and operational issues. It needs to create space to tackle more of the key strategic issues and develop a long-term strategy for education (whether designated as a White Paper or not). Prioritisation is an urgent and ongoing task in light of foreseeable resource constraints. The development and implementation of many sectoral policies is too slow

Leadership: Internally, while recognising the highly complex nature of the issues going to the Management Advisory Committee (MAC), the immediacy of the issues and the rigour of analysis given to each of them at that level is slowing decision-making. Streamlining MAC business should improve operational efficiency. Externally, the Department needs to strengthen its leadership role in respect of early childhood education, higher education and further and adult education. The Department needs to be more ambitious in terms of the scope and pace of delivery in negotiations with management bodies and trade unions

Creating shared understanding: There is a widely held view that joined-up thinking within the Department is a major weakness. Significant improvement in co-ordination on cross-cutting policy and organisational issues below MAC level is required. Externally, there is a need for more effective consultation processes with defined timeframes in place for the conclusion of deliberations and the implementation of agreed policies and measures

Information and Communications Technology (ICT): There is a need to strengthen leadership of senior management in relation to ICT. Significant ICT development is required to meet current and evolving business needs and there is an ongoing challenge around the integration of related systems so as to improve efficiency and service quality. The Department needs to enhance the developmental skills capacity of the ICT unit

School building programme: The Department needs to improve the performance of its Planning and Building Unit (PBU) in order to complete the maximum number of school building projects in line with emerging needs while taking account of budgetary constraints. Processes need to be changed in the PBU to improve service delivery by strengthening project management and ICT capacity, and continuing to develop new project delivery models.

Governance: The Department needs to be more proactive in relation to the oversight of its agencies and the VECs, especially in improving measures of performance. The Department needs to strengthen the capacity of the Higher Education Authority (HEA) in terms of its funding and oversight role – for example, by having an accountability framework in place with the Universities and Institutes of Technology and by ensuring the level of appropriate expertise on its board to improve its effectiveness in delivering its objectives. The Department, in conjunction with the HEA, also needs to improve the strategic dialogue process with higher-education institutions to ensure clearer articulation and more effective delivery of national priorities. To the Department's credit, the National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 contains recommendations that, when implemented, will address the HEA capacity issues.

Source *Third Report of the Organisational Review Programme, Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, (2012)*

A recent report on the teaching and learning of English and mathematics in primary schools, published by the DES, found that many aspects of teachers' work in these areas were satisfactory or better. However, it was disappointing to find that

appropriate learning activities were not provided for pupils in over 16 per cent of English lessons, and that in 15 per cent of mathematics lessons the pupils' learning was not developed satisfactorily (Department of Education and Skills, 2010b).

These are obviously key concerns for many reasons, not least because literacy and numeracy skills play a critical role in enabling students to learn other subjects, participate fully in education and society, and ultimately achieve their potential. A high level of literacy and numeracy is also of critical importance in the highly skilled workplaces that are important to Ireland's aspirations to be a knowledge economy and key to improving Ireland's economic growth and competitiveness.

A national plan to address the challenge of improving literacy and numeracy skills in schools was launched by the DES in July 2011 and will be outlined later in this report (see Section 5.4).

Nevertheless, the quality of the Irish education system has been recognised as a key contributor to Ireland's success for many years and has been cited on many occasions as one of the factors that encourages global organisations to invest here. The question then is whether or not the school system has the capacity to establish a culture of continuous improvement, and at the same time respond to the challenges of the current context where resources have been, and will remain considerably reduced. What arrangements are in place in the school system to drive and support the achievement of standards and improve quality and accountability, and how well are they working?

The following chapters set out the regulation, standards and accountability arrangements that are currently at work in the primary and post-primary school system.

Chapter 2

Legislation and the Irish School System

As stated previously, the education landscape has seen the commencement of a range of legislation during the last decade or more. This chapter provides a summary of the legislative developments that have been influencing the Irish school system during that period and a description of a range of agencies that have been established as part of the legislative requirements.

2.1 Legislation

2.1.1 The Education Act 1998

The Education Act 1998 ensures formal provision for the education of ‘every person in the State, including any person with a disability or who has other special educational needs’. The Act governs a range of educational settings including primary and post-primary schools. It sets out the functions and responsibilities of the key partners in the education system. It also provides for the establishment of Boards of Management for all schools.

2.1.2 Education (Welfare) Act 2000

The Education (Welfare) Act 2000 provides for the entitlement of every child in the State to a certain minimum education. The Act sets out a framework within which issues relating to the educational welfare of children, including the causes and effects of non-attendance at school, can be addressed. It also provides, for the first time, for the identification of children who are being educated outside the recognised school system, providing a structure to ensure that the education that is being provided to them meets their constitutional rights. The Act provided for the establishment of the National Educational Welfare Board (NEWB), which, through a network of educational welfare officers, is responsible for the implementation of the provisions of the Act.

2.1.3 The Teaching Council Act 2001

This Act sets out to promote teaching as a profession and provided for the establishment of the Teaching Council, which is the professional body for teaching in Ireland. The Act sets out the responsibilities of the Council, which was established on a statutory basis in March 2006. The Teaching Council’s main functions include the promotion of teaching as a profession at both primary and

post-primary level, the promotion of the professional development of teachers, and the regulation of standards in the profession. More detailed information about the Council and its responsibilities is included later in this report.

2.1.4 Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004⁹

The Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act was passed in 2004 to ensure that persons with special educational needs can be educated, where possible, in an inclusive environment. It also provides that they have the same rights to education as persons who do not have special educational needs, in a manner that is informed by best international practice. The Act also sets out to assist persons with special educational needs to leave school with the skills necessary to participate in society, and to live independent and fulfilled lives. The Act places certain obligations on schools, school principals and health boards, and provides for the greater involvement of parents of children with special educational needs in the education of their children. The National Council for Special Education, established under the Act, has responsibility to improve the delivery of education services to persons with special educational needs.

2.2 Agencies

In addition to these statutory instruments, recent years have also seen the establishment of a number of key agencies who support the work of the Department of Education and Skills in the adaptation and implementation of legislative requirements and the delivery of services. A brief description of the key agencies and their work is presented in the following sections.

2.2.1 The National Educational Welfare Board

The National Educational Welfare Board was established in 2002 and has a statutory function to ensure that every child either attends a school or otherwise receives an education. In particular, the Board has a key role in following up on children who are not attending school regularly, and where there is a concern about the child's educational welfare. The Board also has responsibility for children who are being educated outside of school (e.g., at home) and 16–17 year olds who leave school to take up employment.

The Board is appointed by the Minister for Education and Skills and its members are drawn from teachers, school management, parents, agencies and services who work with young people, and a number of relevant government departments. The ethos of the Board follows the Act. Instead of admonishing children and parents for

⁹ At the time of writing there are still sections of this Act which have yet to be commenced.

non-attendance, the NEWB seeks to get to the root of problems behind non-attendance. For example, a child might be sick; there might be financial issues in the home; there might be a death in the family; or a child may not want to go to school because he or she is being bullied. Issues such as these must be addressed if a child's individual attendance issues are to be solved in the long term. The NEWB places an emphasis on encouraging attendance rather than on regulation, but where other measures fail and parents do not co-operate with efforts to ensure the attendance of children at school, the NEWB may take a court action against the parent(s). A small number of such cases have been prosecuted.

2.2.2 National Qualifications Authority

The National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQA) is an agency of the Department of Education and Skills and the Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation¹⁰ and was set up in February 2001. It has responsibility for developing and maintaining the National Framework of Qualifications and has three principal objectives, which are set out in the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999:

- The establishment and maintenance of a framework of qualifications for the development, recognition and award of qualifications based on standards of knowledge, skill or competence to be acquired by learners;
- The establishment and promotion of the maintenance and improvement of the standards of awards of the further and higher education and training sector, other than in the existing universities; and
- The promotion and facilitation of access, transfer and progression throughout the span of education and training provision.

The National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) is a system of ten levels. Each level is based on nationally agreed standards of knowledge, skill and competence. With regard to the focus of this report on primary and post-primary education years, the Junior Certificate is classified as a Level 3 award and the Leaving Certificate is classified as a Level 4/5 award (National Framework of Qualifications, 2011).

The NQA is not an awarding body. Its key function is to determine whether any particular programme of education and training is higher education and training or further education and training. Under the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999, the Further Education and Training Awards Council and the Higher Education and Training Awards Council are independent bodies with separate and inter-independent functions.

In 2011 the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Bill 2011 was published. This legislation provides for a new, single national agency,

¹⁰ Formerly known as the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment.

Qualifications and Quality Assurance Ireland, which will replace a range of qualification agencies.¹¹ The new organisation will also take responsibility for the external quality assurance review of the universities, a function that is currently performed by the Irish Universities Quality Board.

2.2.3 The National Council for Special Education

The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) was established in 2003 as an independent statutory body to improve the delivery of education services to persons with special educational needs arising from disabilities, with particular emphasis on children. NCSE provides a local service that is delivered through a national network of Special Educational Needs Organisers, who interact with parents and schools, and liaise with the HSE in providing resources to support children with special educational needs (National Council for Special Education, 2011).

There are 105 special schools in Ireland for children with special educational needs arising from disability. In addition to these schools, the DES has also granted recognition as special schools for children with autism to thirteen centres that were previously part of the Applied Behavioural Analysis pilot project. According to NCSE figures, there are approximately 6,340 children attending special schools for children with disabilities. An additional 3,000 pupils are enrolled in special classes for children with special education needs arising from a disability of which approximately 2,630 children are at primary level and 369 are at post-primary level (National Council for Special Education, 2011).

There are more than 9,000 Whole-Time Equivalent (WTE) special needs teacher posts in mainstream primary and post-primary schools for teachers working directly with children with special educational needs, and more than 1,100 teachers are employed in special schools. There are also 10,575 WTE Special Needs Assistants (SNA) posts in schools to assist in the support of children with care needs (DES, 2010 cited in NCSE 2011). During the past decade, the government has prioritised the provision of supports for students with special educational needs, for example, expenditure on the Special Needs Assistant Scheme increased by 92 per cent in the period 2001–2009. However, in the context of the highly constrained financial situation and the National Recovery Programme, the government has decided to place a cap on the number of whole-time equivalent Special Needs Assistants' posts in schools at 10,575 (Department of Education and Skills, 2011b). This is a concern and challenge for schools, teachers and parents of children with special educational needs, many of whom have taken to the streets in protest.

¹¹ These agencies include: the Further Education and Training Awards Council; The Higher Education and Training Awards Council; the National Qualifications Authority Ireland; and the Irish Universities Quality Board.

2.2.4 State Examinations Commission

The State Examinations Commission was established on a statutory basis in 2003 when it assumed responsibility for the operation of the State Junior and Leaving Certificate examinations from the DES. The Commission's mission is to:

provide a high quality State Examination and Assessment System incorporating the highest standards of openness, fairness and accountability. (www.stateexaminations.ie)

The Commission is responsible for the provision and quality of all aspects of the established Leaving Certificate, Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme, Leaving Certificate Applied and Junior Certificate Examinations. The Commission is also responsible for certain trade and professional examinations.

The next chapter describes the roles and responsibilities of a number of sections within DES, in particular the role of the Inspectorate Division; management of arrangements in schools, specifically, the role of school Boards of Management; the Teaching Council; and the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment.

Chapter 3

Stakeholder Responsibilities

The Education Act 1998 sets out the responsibilities of three stakeholder groups who are individually and collectively responsible for the setting and achievement of standards and accountability in primary and post-primary education in Ireland: (i) the Department of Education and Science, in particular the Inspectorate Division; (ii) Boards of Management (BOMs) and Patrons of Schools; and (iii) the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment.

The maintenance of standards¹² and accountability in individual primary and post-primary schools is central to the achievement of education policy in Ireland. The Education Act 1998 delineates the responsibility of the Minister for Education and Skills with regard to quality assurance within the education system generally. In particular, Section 13 of the Act specifies the role of the Inspectorate Division of the Department of Education and Skills. Section 14 of the Act clearly identifies the responsibilities of primary and post-primary school BOMs in the achievement of standards and accountability.

The following section outlines the roles and responsibilities of a number of sections within the DES, in particular the role of the Inspectorate Division, school BOM, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) and the Teaching Council, with regard to the achievement of standards and accountability in the Irish school system.

3.1 Department of Education and Skills

As stated previously, the DES has overall responsibility for education policy and for the administration of the education system in Ireland. The following sections describe several key sections/divisions within the Department who have responsibilities in relation to the achievement of standards and accountability in Irish schools. For the purposes of this report the role and responsibilities of the Inspectorate Division is elaborated in more detail than the other sections/divisions in light of its engagement and interaction with schools, teachers, pupils, parents and BOMs through a range of monitoring, inspection and evaluation arrangements.

¹² Educational standards has a meaning quite separate to the use of the term in other sectors and services. Generally, in education, the term is taken to mean the levels of achievement attained by learners, which is only one indicator of system quality.

3.1.1 Qualifications, Curriculum and Assessment Policy Unit

The Qualifications, Curriculum and Assessment Policy Unit (QCAP) is responsible for leading policy development in respect of curriculum and assessment issues within the Department, including the setting of standards via the curriculum. The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (see Section 3.3) provides advice to the Minister on curriculum and assessment issues, that is subsequently considered by the policy unit.

Decisions regarding the curriculum standards to be adopted, the timing of curricular change, and the types of assessment to be used in schools are finalised by this unit for Ministerial consideration and approval. The unit also has strong linkages with the State Examinations Commission, described previously, and with the Educational Research Centre. The QCAP is staffed by a number of officials, who are assisted by members of the Inspectorate.

3.1.2 Teacher Education Section

The Teacher Education section of the Department is responsible for the development and overseeing of the implementation of teacher education policy on behalf of the Minister. It works closely with the Teaching Council the body responsible for the development of professional standards for teachers and teacher education, (described later in Section 3.4), and oversees and funds an extensive programme of professional development for teachers.

3.1.3 Schools Division/School Governance Section

The Schools Division/School Governance Section of the Department maintains links with the management of each school and/or each Vocational Educational Committee, and has responsibility to oversee the implementation of the relevant rules and regulations. It works closely with the Department's Inspectorate, especially in regard to the improvement necessary in poorly performing schools.

3.1.4 Inspectorate Division

The Inspectorate Division of the DES has a statutory quality assurance and support obligation in relation to educational provision as set out in Section 13 of the Education Act 1998. The Act defines the functions of an inspector in his/her dealings with teachers and school management and outlines the duty of the Inspectorate in advising the Minister. Other legislation, such as the Education Welfare Act 2000, also has a direct bearing on the work of the Inspectorate.

In recent years, the Inspectorate has gone through significant change and development. Traditionally, the Inspectorate had a wide range of duties, which included the inspection of schools, the running of the State examinations, advising on the allocation of additional teaching resources for students with special educational needs, and the operation of a psychological service. At one time it also provided professional development courses for teachers and conducted limited

inspections in certain aspects of primary teacher education courses. However, during the last ten years or so the implementation of legislation, which has provided for the establishment of specialist agencies to support the work of the DES, has resulted in the responsibility for some of these areas being transferred, for example:

- Since 2003 the Inspectorate's role in the provision of resources for pupils with special educational needs has been transferred to the National Council for Special Education, although the Inspectorate continues to evaluate the services for pupils with special educational needs;
- Until the enactment of the Teaching Council Act 2001, members of the Inspectorate advised the Department's Teacher Education Section on accreditation and recognition of teachers' qualifications at primary level and they also advised on the Teacher Registration Council (for second-level teachers) on similar issues. These functions have passed to the Teaching Council (see Section 3.4) but the Inspectorate continues to assess the professional competence of primary teachers for the purposes of full registration with the Council;
- Until March 2003 much of the work of the post-primary inspectors was the organisation of the Junior and Leaving Certificate examinations. This work is now being done by the State Examinations Commission, which publishes the Chief Examiners' reports on the outcomes of the examinations in a number of subjects.

Notwithstanding the above, the DES Inspectorate continues to play a central oversight role in ensuring that standards are maintained and improved in these and a range of other areas from early childhood education¹³ through to third-level education. The specialist agencies work in partnership with the Inspectorate, as well as with the QCAP and the Teacher Education Section in the Department of Education and Skills in relation to their specific areas of responsibility. The Inspectorate is also directly responsible, at post-primary level, for the evaluation of the Transition Year programme.

The DES Inspectorate conducts an inspection and advisory programme in primary and second-level schools, and in centres for education. It does so using a variety of inspection models, ranging from short, unannounced inspections to longer, more in-depth evaluations. Reports are produced on individual schools and centres. In addition, analysis of emerging trends across a number of inspections is used to report on various aspects of the school system. From time to time, the Inspectorate also conducts specialised or thematic evaluations, on topics such as the

¹³ Early childhood education is usually referred to as *early childhood care and education* and covers the period of 0–6 years. Responsibility for standards in early childhood education is shared with the HSE, which is responsible for the inspection in pre-schools, while the DES Inspectorate inspects infant classes in primary schools.

implementation of the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) programme or the teaching of literacy and numeracy. (See Section 5.3 for a description of DEIS).

At primary level, the DES also undertakes evaluations of, for example, the provision for Traveller education, implementation of the primary school curriculum, and literacy and numeracy in schools designated as disadvantaged under the DEIS, as well as the National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People, which was launched in 2011 (see Section 5.4).

3.1.5 Inspectorate Code of Practice

The increasing emphasis on standards and accountability in Irish education applies to the work of the Inspectorate and is reflected in *The Professional Code of Practice on Evaluation and Reporting for the Inspectorate*. The purpose of the Code, which was published in 2002, is to formalise the practices and procedures that underpin the work of the Inspectorate and to make clear the standards to which inspectors work. It applies equally to evaluating and reporting on the work of schools as units, on individual teachers, on curricular programmes and on the implementation of ministerial regulations, carried out by inspectors working individually or in teams. The guidelines set out general principles in relation to the role of the Inspectorate in school evaluation and reporting processes. The Code states that the aims of evaluation are to:

- Identify, acknowledge and affirm good practice in schools;
- Promote continuing improvement in the quality of education offered by schools;
- Promote self-evaluation and continuous development by schools and staffs; and
- Provide an assurance of quality in the educational system as a whole, based on the collection of objective, dependable, high-quality data (Department of Education and Science, 2002: 1).

The Code also specifically commits the Inspectorate to a system of evaluation which is fair and consistent, both in the manner in which inspections are carried out and in the style of reporting that it generates.

3.1.6 Internal Monitoring and Evaluation Arrangements in the Inspectorate

In 2005 the Inspectorate commissioned MORI Ireland to conduct a formal customer survey that focused on quality and standards in the evaluation of work done by inspectors in schools. The survey provided an opportunity for parents, members of Boards of Management, school principals and teachers from 150 schools who had been inspected during an 18-month period, to contribute their views on the quality of the services provided by the Inspectorate. The survey focused, in particular, on

professional relationships in the context of school evaluation, evaluation procedures, and reporting practices.

The outcomes of the survey suggested that there was a high degree of satisfaction with the way the Inspectorate conducted evaluation activities in schools (Department of Education and Science, 2005b: 34). In general, the Inspectorate was seen as a highly professional group, and inspectors were regarded as agreeable and efficient by a large majority of teachers and principals. Eighty-nine per cent of principals found the written reports to be fair and balanced. The Inspectorate recorded very high satisfaction levels in other more complex and variable areas of the evaluation process. Despite this positive response, the survey also identified some areas for improvement. In the main these related to the Inspectorate's administrative procedures, for example, notice regarding meetings, lack of consistency between inspectors' oral and written reports, and the punctual provision of written reports to schools (*ibid.*: 34). Following the publication of the MORI report, the Inspectorate has been working on improving its administrative procedures and the other issues raised in the reports.

Since the publication of the outcomes of the MORI survey in 2005, the Inspectorate has also implemented a number of self-reviews. During 2010, for example, it initiated a very intensive self-review starting with small groups of inspectors, initially. This exercise has been extended, and in more recent times it is engaging with internal customers, for example, other sections of the DES. It is also intended to engage more directly with external customers, principals, teachers and parents in the future.

The Inspectorate also has a Review Procedure in respect of the work of all inspectors. Section 13(9) of the Education Act requires the Inspectorate to operate both an informal and formal appeals mechanism, the latter involving an independent reviewer.

At the time of writing, the DES Inspectorate was planning to implement a series of post-inspection questionnaires, which will be managed by a different part of the Inspectorate. It is intended to establish as routine practice that a proportion of schools who have recently been through a Whole School Evaluation and other inspection processes will be invited to provide feedback through the questionnaires on how well the process was executed and what change happened subsequently.

There is recognition among DES Inspectorate representatives that the monitoring and review practices that have been described must become an integral part of its work, and that there is a need in the system for the articulation of a much more coherent set of standards, which could be benchmarked at various levels in the system.

Along with the implementation of legislation and the establishment of specialist agencies to improve quality and accountability, the DES has also reconfigured some of its internal sections and established new arrangements that support to the development of schools and teachers, for example, the School Improvement Group and the Professional Development Support for Teachers, which are described below.

3.1.7 School Improvement Group

In 2008, the DES initiated arrangements to manage cases of underperforming schools. Members of the Inspectorate work closely with the DES Schools Division¹⁴ and with colleagues in other relevant sections. The work of the group is overseen by an internal co-ordinating group of senior officials drawn from the Department's School Governance Section and the Inspectorate (Hislop, 2012: 28).

The objective of the School Improvement Group is to provide a tailored intervention that responds to the particular circumstances and context of the school. Depending on the issues, the DES works with a range of stakeholders including the patron, trustees and the BOM of the school to ensure that there is a shared understanding of the need for change and improvement within the school (*ibid.*).

At the end of 2011, the School Improvement Group had dealt with a total of 60 schools (39 primary schools and 21 post-primary schools). Fourteen of these schools (11 primary and 3 post-primary) are no longer on the School Improvement agenda; twenty two of the schools have shown significant improvement; and work is continuing in twenty seven of the schools with ongoing follow-up activity (*ibid.*).

3.1.8 Professional Development Support for Teachers (PDST)

The PDST is an amalgamation of the Primary Professional Development Services for Teachers, Leadership Development for Schools Programme and the Second Level Support Service, which have been merged to provide a cross-sectoral support service for schools. The PDST reports to the Teacher Education Section described earlier in Section 3.1. According to DES representatives, it is envisaged that a significant part of the PDST role will be to work with, and provide support to, schools after the completion of a Whole School Evaluation and other emerging evaluation processes, (these processes will be described later in Section 4.1).

The aim of the PDST is to support the development of schools as professional learning communities in which the professional development of teachers is closely linked to school development and improvement, and to the progress of pupils. The PDST provides an advisory service to schools and aims to be flexible in responding to the self-identified needs of individual schools and teachers, as well as national system priorities, thus providing both a top-down and bottom-up approach. PDST personnel work in multi-disciplinary teams on a regional basis in close co-operation with the Education Centre network.

The Education Centre network comprises 21 full-time and 9 part-time education centres nationwide. Under the remit of the DES, the centres host the national programmes of curriculum and reform, and the support services that work on a range of issues relating to teaching and learning. They also provide a range of

¹⁴ The DES Schools Division has responsibility for the general administration of school governance.

supports in response to the specific needs of teachers and schools in their individual catchment areas.

3.2 School Boards of Management

Another statutory stakeholder in the achievement of standards and accountability in schools is the school BOM. BOMs are appointed by their patrons¹⁵ and are required to report to them on certain issues like ethos and other policies. With the exception of the school principal and the teacher representative, all of the remaining members of the Board, including the Chairperson, are volunteers. (There are approximately 18,000 volunteers running the management system in Catholic primary and post-primary schools, which represents in the region of 90 per cent of schools.) This voluntary nature of school management is estimated, according Board of Management representatives, to save the State between €2–3 million each year.¹⁶

3.2.1 BOM Roles and Responsibilities

The responsibilities of BOMs are specified in Section 15 of the Education Act 1998, which states that it shall be the duty of the Board to manage the school on behalf of the patron for the benefit of the students and their parents and to provide, or cause to be provided, an appropriate education for each student at the school for which the Board has responsibility. Board members carry the responsibility for the management of the school, subject to their accountability to the patron, and subject to the regulations of the Department of Education and Skills.

BOMs are responsible *inter alia* for the efficient use of resources, the public interest in the affairs of the school, and accountability to students, their parents, the patron, staff and the community served by the school. They are also responsible for the publication of a range of school policies that serve the effective management of the school, e.g., admission to and participation in the school, including the policy for school admissions, and the suspension and expulsion of students.

¹⁵ The Education Act 1998 provides a statutory basis to the role of the patron and sets out the rules for determining who the patron is. A school patron usually appoints a Board of Management to act as manager. In general, the patron of a school is a representative of the owners, and can be an individual or group. http://www.citizensinformation.ie/en/education/primary_and_post_primary_education/going_to_primary_school/ownership_of_primary_schools.html

¹⁶ Arrangements for school management boards are not standard. There are differences between those at primary and second level and further differences between voluntary secondary schools, vocational schools and community colleges, and community and comprehensive schools.

Reporting Information

Section 20 of the Education Act 1998 requires BOMS to establish procedures for informing parents of students in the school about the operation and performance of the school in any school year with particular reference to the achievement of objectives as set out in the school plan. Section 21 of the Act outlines the responsibility of BOMs to prepare, publish and circulate a school plan and to ensure that it is regularly reviewed and updated. Both of these areas are essential in the role of the BOMs in maintaining and being responsible for the quality of the work of schools.

Engaging with Students

Section 27 of the Education Act (1998) also requires BOMs to establish and maintain procedures that facilitate the communication of information about the activities of the school to their students. This applies to the BOMs of both primary and post-primary schools and must have regard to the age and experience of the students, in association with their parents and teachers. The Act provides for the establishment of a student council in post-primary schools, and BOMs are required to facilitate and give all reasonable assistance to:

- Students who wish to establish a student council; and
- Student councils when they have been established.

BOMs are responsible for drawing up the rules for the establishment of a student council, including the election of members and the dissolution of a council, in accordance with guidelines issued by the Minister, (the Education Act 1998: Section 27).

In 2002, the Minister for Education issued the following guidelines on the establishment and dissolution of student councils:

A Board of Management shall, following consultation with teachers and parents, draw up rules for the establishment of a Student Council, having regard to the following basic principles:

- the Student Council shall promote the interests of the school and the involvement of students in the affairs of the school, in co-operation with the Board, parents and teachers;
- the Council should, as far as is practicable, be representative of each class or year group in the school; and

- the Board of Management shall at all times retain the right to dissolve a Council or remove a Council member, in accordance with these guidelines.¹⁷

Engaging with Parents

In 1991, DES circulars 21/91 and 27/91 were issued to primary and post-primary schools respectively. These circulars were concerned with ensuring that partnership with parents was positively pursued at a local level by primary and post-primary schools in that:

The Department recognises that school/family relationships are particularly important. As the recognised primary educators of the child, parents have a right to be assured that the child's needs are being met by the school. It follows that parents should be given as much information as possible on all aspects of the child's progress and development. Parents, as a body, are also entitled to know where the school and the education system are meeting children's needs (DES Circular M27/91).

This relationship, which was statutorily reinforced in Section 26 of the Education Act 1998, recognises the rights of parents of a recognised school to establish a parents' association comprising parents of students attending the school. The function of a parents' association is to promote the interests of the students in a school in co-operation with the Board, principal, teachers and students of a school in order to build an effective partnership between home and school.

Thus, the Act requires BOMs to promote contact between the school, parents of students in that school and the community, and shall facilitate and give all reasonable assistance to parents who wish to establish a parents' association and to a parents' association when it is established (Education Act 1998 Section 26).

The local network of parents' associations is represented at national level by two parents' representative bodies in Ireland, i.e., the National Parents' Council Primary (NPC) and the National Parents' Council Post-primary (NPCpp).

3.2.2 BOM Employer Responsibilities

A crucial and challenging function for school BOMs is that of employer. This function not only relates to the teachers in the school but also to all of the auxiliary members of staff, whose numbers have grown substantially since 1998. These include special needs assistants, secretaries, bus escorts and cleaners to name a few. BOMs have always been responsible for the performance of individual teachers and the power to suspend and/or dismiss in cases of poor performance.

¹⁷ <http://www.education.ie/home/home.jsp?maincat=&pcategory=10815&ecategory=41674§ionpage=12251&language=EN&link=link001&page=1&doc=37883>

However, the implementation of Section 24¹⁸ of the Education Act 1998 in September 2009 places a statutory responsibility on the BOM in relation to performance of individual teachers in their school, and provides for the suspension and dismissal of underperforming teachers by BOMs. These new agreed procedures provide for two separate and independent strands of accountability:

- Procedures relating to professional competence issues; and
- Procedures relating to work conduct and matters other than professional competence.

These new procedures represent quite a step-change for many school BOMs who, in the past, viewed their role as purely administrative, and left issues relating to teaching and learning to the education professionals in the school. According to BOM representatives at primary level, it would have been rare to find issues relating to teaching and learning on the agenda for BOM meetings. In the past, it was also unlikely that these BOMs, while noting the content of a WSE report, would have felt that they should involve themselves in issues relating to teaching and learning standards because they believed that this was an issue for the education professionals in their school, and that they were a step removed from this. However, that is not to say that primary school BOMs have not taken appropriate steps in response to any serious and detrimental issues that might have been identified in the WSE report. According to a stakeholder interviewed for this report, BOMs at post-primary are sometimes more engaged in the teaching and learning outcomes within their school, since it is during these years that students and their parents become increasingly focused on academic achievement for the purposes of deciding career paths and choosing college courses. These schools are also concerned with attracting pupils and therefore a school's academic achievement record is important from the perspective of a BOM.

During the last decade, BOMs have also been occupied in meeting their responsibilities and the achievement of standards in a range of areas for which there has been an increasing amount of legislation – health and safety, child protection issues – as well as adapting school buildings to facilitate the inclusion of children with special needs. Another challenging issue relating to primary school BOMs is the significant number of schools who do not have administrative principal teachers, which means that there is very little time for strategic thinking and planning, by comparison with schools that have a non-teaching principal. In recent years, however, teaching principals have been granted a number of days of release time to enable them to carry out their administrative duties.

Thus, school BOMs are responsible for a highly diverse range and complex set of issues in the management of schools. This issue was highlighted in the recent Department of Public Expenditure and Reform Organisational Review Programme

¹⁸ This section does not apply to teachers or other staff of a school that is established or maintained by a vocational educational committee.

(ORP) Report 2012 which reported that many stakeholders, i.e. school principals, management associations and BOMs, expressed the view that the responsibilities of the voluntary BOMs are onerous and will continue to be so in the years ahead. In general, many BOMs lack the necessary expertise in complex areas such as employment law, finance and school planning (Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, 2012: 51).

3.2.3 Emerging Challenges for BOMs

Notwithstanding the findings of the *Organisational Review Programme Report*, the Education Act 1998, specifically Section 24 referred to above, significantly broadened the responsibilities of school Boards. The Act places a statutory responsibility on BOMs that requires them to grapple with issues relating to the standards of teaching and learning in their school as well as responsibilities relating to the professional competence and conduct issues among their teaching employees (see Section 3.2.2).

This will require BOMs to become more accountable for the quality and capacity of the teachers in their schools, so as to ensure the achievement of high-quality learning outcomes for the school and its pupils. The majority of issues that might arise in relation to a teacher's performance are the responsibility of BOMs as employers and managers of schools. There are agreed procedures that BOMs follow in cases where there are concerns or complaints against a teacher. However, the role of the Teaching Council, which will be outlined later in Section 3.5, will also come into play in relation to teacher competence and fitness to practise issues. If, after due process, a BOM moves to dismiss a teacher they are obliged to inform the Teaching Council of the dismissal and the grounds on which the dismissal was made. The Teaching Council procedures in relation to competency and fitness to practice would then be initiated.¹⁹ De-licensing and removal from the Register of Teachers is the ultimate sanction that can be used by the Council whereas a BOM can dismiss a teacher. A BOM can also raise concerns with the Teaching Council in relation to the capacity of a teacher to teach in the absence of a decision to dismiss.

The management representative bodies provide support and training opportunities for BOM Chairpersons and school principals in a broad range of areas such as HR, Finance, Child Protection and Teaching and Learning. They also provide support and training for their members in relation to Section 24 of the Act, which sets out the statutory responsibility of BOMs to initiate disciplinary procedures against teachers where there are concerns in relation to conduct and/or professional competence. According to BOM representatives, many BOMs have not had the occasion to implement all stages of the Section 24 process, and therefore may not be directly familiar with the process which became operational at the end of 2009.

¹⁹ The Teaching Council's responsibilities in relation to competency and fitness to practise issues have yet to be commenced under the Teaching Council Act 2001.

3.2.4 The Impact of the External System on the Role of BOMs

It is important to note that there are a number of system issues that impact on the ability of BOMs to implement and maintain standards in their schools. There are many external decisions, arrangements and practices which the BOMs do not have control over. BOMs are subject to Ministerial decisions, for example, relating to the pupil/teacher ratio and class size, teacher re-deployment panel arrangements and availability of funding for education support services, such as special needs assistants, school secretaries, caretakers and so on.

For a number of years now, BOMs have been finding it difficult to fill vacancies for principals in their schools. This is particularly challenging in the primary sector, where a number of schools during the last few years did not receive a sufficient number of applicants for the role of principal, forcing them to fill the vacancy on a temporary basis for a year. A small number of schools are in a situation where they have been unable to fill the vacancy on a permanent basis, due to low levels of interest in the post, and have had a temporary principal in place for a few years.

Even in circumstances where a BOM may be more engaged with the quality of teaching and learning issues in its school, it can be difficult for it to measure the performance of individual teachers. The use of standardised teaching contracts, for example, such as those that are used in primary schools, do not specify in detail the performance expectations attached to the role. Instead, they state that the duties of the teacher will be in accordance with the Rules for National Schools. This applies to permanent contracts and fixed-term/temporary contracts.

3.2.5 Internal Arrangements for Monitoring and Evaluation Among BOMs

According to school BOM representatives, the practice of systematic monitoring and evaluation among BOMs at both primary and post-primary levels is low. It is more likely, however, to be done at post-primary level where there is usually greater attention paid to performance and results in the context of pupils making college and career choices.

According to BOM representatives, it is not until parents begin to vote with their feet and take their children with them, which can result in a school losing one or two teachers and/or being at risk of closure, that the BOM takes notice.

While there are no established formal networking arrangements for members of BOMs, there are opportunities to share information and learn through the training programmes that are provided by the BOM representative bodies.²⁰ These training

²⁰ For example, the Catholic Primary School Management Association (CPSMA), which represents more than 3,000 Catholic primary schools, the Joint Managerial Body (JMB), which represents the BOMs of over 400 voluntary secondary schools in the Republic of Ireland and is the umbrella body for the Association of Management of Catholic Secondary Schools (AMCSS), and the Irish School Heads' Association (ISA) which represents the Protestant schools in the State.

events are usually on HR issues and policies. The representative bodies also use newsletters to provide information and advice on topical issues of concern for BOMs.

Having briefly outlined the responsibilities of various DES sections/divisions and school BOMs we now look at the responsibilities of school principals and teachers under the Education Act 1998. This will be followed by a brief description of the work of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, which has a statutory responsibility for the design of the national curricula for primary and post-primary schools. A fuller discussion of the role of the Teaching Council completes this chapter.

3.3 The Principal and Teachers

Section 22 of the Education Act 1998 sets out the functions of the principal and teachers. Under the Act the principal and teachers in a recognised school are responsible for the instruction provided to students in the schools and are expected to contribute generally to the education and personal development of students in that school.

Principals and teachers are expected to:

- Encourage and foster learning in students;
- Regularly evaluate students and periodically report the results of the evaluation to the students and their parents;
- Collectively promote co-operation between the school and the community that it serves; and
- Subject to the terms of any applicable collective agreement and their contract of employment, carry out those duties that (i) in the case of teachers are assigned to them by or at the direction of the principal and (ii) in the case of the principal, are assigned to him or her by the Board (Education Act 1998, Section 22.2).

Principal teachers are responsible for the day-to-day management of schools including providing guidance and direction to the teachers and other members of staff.²¹ They are accountable to the BOM of their school. They are also tasked with providing leadership to teachers and other staff and the students of the school. They are responsible too, in collaboration with the BOM, parents and teachers:

²¹ For example, the school secretary, caretaker, classroom assistants and special needs assistants.

- For creating a school environment which supports learning among the students and which promotes the professional development of teachers; and
- Setting objectives for the school and monitoring the achievement of these objectives.²²

3.4 The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment

Responsibility for the design of the curriculum for both primary and post-primary level lies with one of the many specialist agencies that has been established during the last decade, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA). The brief of the NCCA, which was established as a statutory body in 2001 as outlined in the Education Act 1998, is to advise the Minister for Education and Skills²³ on matters relating to the curriculum for early childhood education, primary and post-primary schools, and the assessment procedures employed in schools and examinations on subjects that are part of the curriculum. It does not, however, have a role in evaluating schools or teachers. The work of the NCCA is guided by a highly collaborative model, which is characterised by the use of curriculum committees for individual subjects. These committees comprise a range of curriculum and subject specialists, and represent stakeholders from across the education system including DES, practising teachers, management bodies, parents, trade unions and academics.

In addition to developing the curriculum for primary schools, and the Junior and Senior Cycles for second-level schools, the NCCA has also produced guidelines for the teaching of these curricula, for teaching children with general learning disabilities, curriculum planning tools, and, assessment guidelines and tools.

In terms of supporting learning in the system, one of the NCCA's strategic goals is to ensure that the education system has as much access as possible to its research and evidence base. The organisation requires its researchers to be available to provide briefing sessions on their research and to summarise the research findings so that individual schools can benchmark themselves against the findings. In addition, the researchers are required to ensure that the data collected is given back to the schools who participated in the research so that they can use the information to benchmark themselves, and inform their planning and development processes.

²² The OECD (2007) carried out a study which describes the confusion caused by a lack of clarity in relation to teacher careers and leadership roles in the Irish school system which merits attention here. <http://www.oecd.org/edu/schoolleadership>.

²³ The Minister for Education and Skills is supported in his decision-making regarding the advice of the NCCA by the Department's QCAP Unit.

The NCCA's quality assurance processes are informed by international benchmarking, engagement and evidence research. The organisation strives to keep abreast of international developments in education. It does this by participating in international networks and commissioning international comparative studies. The NCCA believes that these activities are critically important, particularly in the context of reduced resources.

3.5 The Teaching Council

The Teaching Council was established on a statutory basis in March 2006, under the Teaching Council Act 2001. Its mission is to promote and maintain the highest standards of teaching, learning and professional conduct in Irish schools. The Board of the Council comprises the following:

- 11 primary teachers (9 elected and 2 union nominees);
- 11 post-primary teachers (7 elected and 4 union nominees);
- 2 nominated by Colleges of Education;
- 2 nominated by specified third level bodies;
- 4 nominated by school management bodies (2 primary and 2 post-primary);
- 2 nominated by parents' associations (1 primary and 1 post-primary); and
- 5 nominated by the Minister for Education and Skills, including 1 representing IBEC and ICTU.

Members of the Council contribute their expertise through a range of committees and sub-groups, for example, the Investigation Committee and Disciplinary Committee²⁴, which the organisation has established in order to progress its work.

The Council also involves representatives from other professional bodies on panels that have been established to review different areas that come under the remit of the Council, for example, representatives of An Bord Áltranais, The Irish Medical Council, The Royal Institute of Architects, Engineers Ireland and the Scottish Teaching Council. This enables the Council to be informed, and make sure that what they are doing is in line with the direction that other national and international professional bodies are taking.

²⁴ See Section 3.5.2 for more information on these committees.

The Council's statutory responsibilities are focused on the professional journey of a teacher as a lifelong learner, and reflect the priorities of many other EU Member States. The journey should start with initial teacher education and entry to the profession, followed by induction, probation and continuing professional development. In broad terms, its functions can be set out in two broad areas, i.e., the protection of standards of entry to the profession, and the protection of standards while in the profession. Both of these functions, and their attending elements, are briefly outlined in the following sections.

3.5.1 Protection of Standards of Entry to the Profession

Professional Accreditation of Initial Teacher Education

The Teaching Council is responsible for setting the standards for entry to the profession and ensuring that these standards remain consistently high. The Council is empowered under Section 38 of the Teaching Council Act 2001 to review and professionally accredit programmes of initial teacher education and states that the Council shall:

- Review and accredit the programmes of teacher education and training provided by institutions of higher education and training in the State;
- Review the standards of education and training appropriate to a person entering a programme of teacher education and training; and
- Review the standards of knowledge, skill and competence required for the practice of teaching.

The Council, in 2009, initiated a review of teacher education programmes on a pilot basis. This work is informed by a study commissioned by the Council, which included a cross-national review of teacher education policies in 9 countries²⁵ (Teaching Council, 2009). The study identified 8 principles that underpin quality in Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programmes (see Box 3.1).

²⁵ Including Ireland, Northern Ireland, Scotland, England, Finland, USA, Poland, Singapore and New Zealand.

Box 3.1 Principles Underpinning Quality Initial Teacher Education Programmes

Vision: A common, clear vision of good teaching practice integrated across course modules and teaching practice in schools.

Focus on excellence in professional practice: Clearly defined and agreed criteria for 'good teaching' linked to wider professional expectations and codes of conduct.

Knowledge of learners linked to curriculum: Teaching of curriculum permeated by an understanding of the contingent nature of learning and the impact of both the immediate and wider social context on learning and teaching.

Integration of foundations, methods and teaching practice: Strategic initiatives to integrate foundations, curriculum/methods and teaching practice as the three core components of ITE.

Addressing the apprenticeship of observation: Given the long-term influence of the 15,000 hours student teachers have already spent in classrooms prior to entering ITE, there must be significant opportunity to make explicit the impact of these experiences on learning, teaching and curriculum.

Strategies to examine culture and schooling: Strategies to highlight the impact of culture (cultural homogeneity, diversity and change) in teacher education coursework and teaching practice.

Strong relationships, common knowledge and shared beliefs: Well structured alliance between universities and schools built around strong relationships, common knowledge and shared beliefs to support ITE (This also applies to induction and CPD.)

Integration-focused projects: Use of case studies, portfolios and other projects focused on supporting the integration of different knowledge sources on teaching, learning and curriculum emerging from schools and universities.

Source Learning to Teach and its Implications for the Continuum of Teacher Education: A Nine-Country Cross-National Study (Conway *et al.*, 2009)

Four teacher education programme reviews were completed in the 2009/2010 school year. A further four programmes were the focus of the review in 2010/2011. The reports setting out the findings of each of the eight reviews are available in full on the Teaching Council's website www.teachingcouncil.ie (The Teaching Council, 2012).

There are three possible outcomes of a review: (i) accreditation with or without recommendations; (ii) accreditation with stipulations that are binding; or (iii) a deferral of an accreditation. To date, the Council has not had to defer an accreditation, although there were some programmes that were granted conditional accreditation subject to amendments and/or improvements.

According to the Teaching Council, they have received a very positive response from the colleges concerned, who have taken on board and advanced the

recommendations during a relatively short timeframe. The process of reviewing and accrediting programmes has provided opportunities for the Council to develop and formalise relationships with the teacher education providers. It has also provided opportunities for shared learning, even though it is on an informal basis, among the providers who have been accredited thus far. The Teaching Council is aware that providers who have been, or are about to be, assessed are contacting each other to find out about their experience of the assessment, how they prepared for the review and how they are addressing the conditional recommendations where they exist. According to stakeholders, it would have been a rare occurrence in the past for teacher education colleges and/or departments to talk to other departments and/or each other about what they were doing and how they were going about it.

Given that there are approximately forty-four separate teacher education programmes,²⁶ and that due to resource constraints it has only been possible thus far to review four programmes each year, the Council is committed to moving towards a position in the future where self-evaluation processes become a more central feature of the review and accreditation strategy. While it is understandable that the Council cannot review all teacher education programmes in the short-term, it will be important that the Council puts in place arrangements to continue to monitor and evaluate education programmes so that the problems associated with self-evaluation avoidance, can be prevented, (see Chapter 4).

In June 2011 the Council announced details of new criteria that higher education institutions providing programmes of teacher education in Ireland are required to observe. They refer to existing models of primary and post-primary ITE programmes. Not only do the criteria and guidelines outline the *inputs* and *processes* that are expected in ITE programmes but they also state, for the first time, the expected *learning outcomes* for graduates of all teacher education programmes. The learning outcomes include the standards of teaching, knowledge, skill and competence together with the values, attitudes and professional dispositions that are central to the practice of teaching (The Teaching Council, 2011b: 22). This approach is very much in line with current international thinking on standards and quality improvement.

Significantly, the criteria propose raising the minimum requirements for persons entering programmes of ITE at primary level and a literacy and numeracy admissions test for mature entrants. It is understood that these proposals are to be the subject of a nationwide consultation process commencing in 2012. There is also an increased emphasis on research and portfolio work. Both of these developments are in harmony with ITE programmes in other countries.

²⁶ This number of teacher education programmes is above the norm when compared to other countries, for example, Singapore has a population similar in size to Ireland's but only one programme and Finland has four. While the Teaching Council has a role in accrediting ITE programmes, the DES also has a role in controlling supply to some degree, except in the case of one private provider.

The Register of Teachers

The Council is required to establish and maintain the Register of Teachers. Under the Teaching Council Act, registration will be mandatory for all teachers wishing to teach in recognised schools where salaries are paid from State monies. To be registered, applicants must satisfy the Council's registration conditions, which include teacher qualification requirements. The Council's registration function provides teachers with their licence to teach.

The establishment of the Register of Teachers in Ireland, for the first time, has been described by stakeholders interviewed for this report as a significant development for teachers in both the development of the profession and the achievement of standards. All persons employed as teachers who were in service prior to the date of the Council's establishment on 28 March 2006 were automatically registered, so long as there was evidence that they had been employed as teachers and applied for registration within a year of that date. In October 2011, there were 73,000 teachers on the register, with possibly hundreds, if not more, who have yet to register.

In June 2011, the Teaching Council was advised by the DES that Section 30 of the Teaching Council Act 2001, which will make it mandatory for teachers to join the register, will be commenced in 2012. This section of the Act also provides that:

A person who is employed as a teacher in a recognised school but:

- is not a registered teacher, or
- is removed or suspended from the Register under Part 5,

shall not be remunerated by the school in respect of his or her employment out of moneys provided by the Oireachtas (Teaching Council Act 2001).

Applicants for registration must be graduates of either Teaching Council accredited programmes of ITC in Ireland, or graduates of ITC programmes completed outside of Ireland, which have been assessed by the Teaching Council to determine if they meet the Irish registration requirements. A further condition attaching to the registration of Teachers is the need to provide evidence of character, and applicants are requested to: (i) arrange for a character reference to be certified by an appropriately qualified person; and (ii) undergo a process of garda vetting. Applicants who have worked abroad have to supply overseas police clearance.

The Register of Teachers is available on the Teaching Council's website and provides a search facility for members of the public to ascertain whether or not a teacher is registered.

Induction and Probation

The transition from an ITC programme to working as a fully qualified and registered teacher is a critical time in a teacher's career. The quality of support provided to teachers during this time can have profound implications for their skills,

competency development and the standard of the teaching and learning experience that they will provide for children into the future.

Recognition of a teacher as a primary school teacher was a function of the Minister of Education until the implementation of the Teaching Council Act 2001. This registration was conditional on satisfactory completion of a probationary period during which the competence of the teacher was assessed by the Inspectorate. At post-primary level, registration of teachers was the responsibility of the Teacher Registration Council. The satisfactory completion of the probationary process was monitored by the principal in post-primary schools. The function of registration has now passed fully to the Teaching Council. Currently, the assessment of a primary teacher's competence while on probation is completed by the Inspectorate on behalf of the Teaching Council. At post-primary level, the assessment of the probationary teacher's competence is signed off by the school principal.

Induction and probation of newly qualified primary teachers will become the responsibility of the Teaching Council when Section 7(2)(f) of the Teaching Council Act 2001, is commenced. According to the Teaching Council, this is likely to be September 2012. This section of the Act requires the Council to establish procedures and criteria in relation to the induction and probation of teachers into the teaching profession.

The commencement of the section of the Act in relation to the registration of teachers requires teachers to have satisfied the non-probationary requirements of registration before they are eligible to initiate their probation in a teaching post. Therefore, the DES has had to make interim adjustments to the probationary process, pending the transfer of responsibilities for probation and induction to the Teaching Council. In September 2010, the DES also established, for the first time in Ireland, a *National Induction Programme*²⁷ to support both primary and post-primary teachers in making a successful transition from initial teacher education to work in a school. Prior to this, arrangements for the induction of newly qualified teachers were very sporadic and informal.

While awaiting the transfer of responsibilities for the probation and induction of teachers, the Council has undertaken a lot of work on the development of a policy on induction, as part of the continuum for teacher education, in preparation for the commencement of this section of the Act.

The Council's policy on induction is based on an appreciation of teaching as an example of lifelong learning, and recognises the important part played by induction in enriching schools themselves as learning environments. The policy is based on three pillars: innovation, integration, and improvement. The Council believes that the implementation of a comprehensive induction programme for all newly

²⁷ This programme emerged from a National Pilot Project on Teacher Induction set up in 2002, involving a limited number of schools (<http://www.nationalinductionprogramme.com/post.html>).

qualified teachers will be a major step forward in building the continuum of teacher education, and will contribute to the improvement of standards in education.

3.5.2 Protection and Maintenance of Standards While in the Profession

Development of Code of Professional Conduct

Another important function of the Teaching Council is the maintenance and improvement of standards of professional practice and conduct. This is done through the development of codes of professional conduct for teachers.

In 2007, the Council published, for the first time in Ireland a code of professional conduct for teachers. The Code was designed around three core objectives: to promote quality teaching and learning; to encourage and support teachers in their professional role; and to promote the teaching profession. The Code identifies the essential values that underpin the profession of teaching in Ireland. It also illustrates the complexity and collaborative nature of the task of teaching and outlines the key responsibilities that are central to the practice of teaching (The Teaching Council, 2007).

On publication of the first Code of Professional Conduct in 2007 (entitled Codes of Professional Conduct for Teachers), the Council committed to reviewing the Code within a period of three to four years. In 2011, the Council published a revised draft of the Code. The Council is working in consultation with stakeholders towards the finalisation of the draft Code in 2012. In this regard, the Council, in collaboration with a focus group of registered teachers, has developed an online survey to gather feedback from teachers, parents and teacher educators to inform its work in finalising the Code. The Council intends to disseminate the revised Code to all teachers and education stakeholders.²⁸

The draft-revised Code is divided into two sections. The first section, entitled ‘Ethics of the Teaching Profession’, articulates the values that underpin the work of teachers in the practice of his/her profession. The second section is entitled ‘Standards of Professional Conduct’ and sets out the high standards of professional conduct and practice that are required of registered teachers. The new draft is significantly more detailed and comprehensive than the original 2007 version and takes account of policy and other developments since 2007, such as the publication of the Teaching Council (Registration) Regulations, 2009 and its Policy on the Continuum of Teacher Education (The Teaching Council, 2011a: 4). For example, the section on ‘fitness to practise’ contained in the Code requires teachers to:

- Maintain high standards of practice in relation to pupil/student learning, planning, monitoring, assessing and reporting;

²⁸ (Teaching Council website: www.teachingcouncil.ie/professional-standards/consultation-on-new-draft-code 06/12/110 - Consultation on New Draft Code)

- Engage with pupils/students to develop teaching, learning and assessment strategies that are differentiated, as appropriate, to meet their individual and collective needs and that assist pupils/students to learn in a variety of ways; and
- Inform their professional judgement and practice by understanding and reflecting on pupil/student development, learning theory, pedagogy, curriculum development, ethics, educational policy and legislation.

The new draft also specifies expectations of teachers to engage in continuing professional development, for example, to:

- Actively maintain and improve their professional knowledge and understanding to ensure it is current, having particular regard to subject matter, pedagogical approaches and educational research pertinent to the curriculum/syllabus/programme which they teach;
- Critically evaluate and reflect on their professional practice and take personal responsibility for maintaining and improving the quality of their professional practice; and
- Actively participate in professional learning communities, support colleagues (including student teachers in their professional development) and contribute to the development of professional knowledge within the classroom, school and at other levels (The Teaching Council, 2011a).

A key objective of the work being done by the Teaching Council in relation to the revised Code is to ensure that it is more robust and explicit than the 2007 Code, so that it supports the work of the Council's Disciplinary Committee in relation to teacher competence and fitness to practise issues. (This Committee will be described later in this section.) When necessary, the Disciplinary Committee conducts hearings on complaints referred to it by the Council's Investigating Committee. These hearings, on commencement of the relevant section of the Teaching Council Act 2001, may lead to a teacher's registration being withdrawn temporarily or permanently (www.teachingcouncil.ie 07/10/11). Further details are provided in the Section below entitled 'Fitness to Practise and the Investigation of Complaints'.

There are two further sections of the Teaching Council Act 2001, described in the following sections which are due for commencement in the near future, and which will be critically important in the achievement of standards and continuous improvement in primary and post-primary education.

Continuing Professional Development (CPD)

The Teaching Council Act 2001 sets out the Council's functions in relation to the continuing professional development of teachers. According to the definition used by the Teaching Council, Continuing Professional Development (CPD) refers to lifelong learning, and comprises the full range of educational experiences designed

to enrich teachers' professional knowledge, understanding and capabilities throughout their careers (The Teaching Council, 2010: 16).

The Council is pro-actively working towards a position where renewal of registration with the Teaching Council will be subject to the receipt of satisfactory evidence in relation to engagement in CPD. A Boston Consulting Report (2003) highlighted that teachers are often dissatisfied with the arrangements and content of professional development programmes. This is particularly true of one-off, off-site seminar-type development programmes. According to the report, the types of professional development most highly valued by teachers are peer-to-peer learning and various forms of mentoring and coaching provided by highly experienced teachers who are recognised for their excellent practices (The Boston Consulting Group, 2003). The work of the Council in relation to the accreditation of CPD programmes will be critical in order to make sure that they are relevant and appropriate and ultimately effective in how they are designed and delivered. The Teaching Council's own research has, of yet, not been able to 'evaluate and assess the quality and relevance of content of CPD for teachers and in particular examine the extent to which training is aligned with their day-to-day work' (Banks & Smyth, 2011: 33).

In 2005, almost every OECD country reported a shortfall in teaching skills and difficulties in updating teachers' skills, especially a lack of competence to deal with new developments in education (including individualised learning, preparing pupils for autonomous learning, dealing with heterogeneous classrooms, and preparing learners to make the most of ICT). This next phase of development in the Teaching Council will be critically important in ensuring that teachers have the competencies and technical skills that will be required to be effective in the twenty-first century.

Fitness to Practise and the Investigation of Complaints

Another of the Teaching Council's key areas of responsibility under the Act will be the investigation of complaints relating to the fitness to practise of registered teachers.

When the relevant section of the Act is commenced, if a complaint is made about a registered teacher, the Council will be empowered to:

- Investigate the complaint;
- Deal with the complaint through its disciplinary procedures; and, if appropriate;
- Impose sanctions against the teachers in question.

Under the Teaching Council Act, the Council, or any person, may apply to the Investigating Committee for an inquiry into the fitness to teach of a registered teacher in cases where:

- The teacher has failed to comply with or has contravened the Teaching Council Act 2001; the Education Act 1998; the Education (Welfare) Act 2000; the VEC Acts 1930 to 1999; or any Regulations made under those Acts;

- The teacher's behaviour constitutes professional misconduct as defined by the Teaching Council Act 2001;
- The Teacher's registration is erroneous due to a false or fraudulent declaration or misrepresentation;
- She/he is medically unfit to teach (Teaching Council website: <http://www.teachingcouncil.ie/structure-of-the-council/council-committees.183.html>).

If the Investigating Committee decides that there is a case to answer, the complaint is forwarded to the Council's Disciplinary Committee which conducts a hearing in relation to the case. A range of sanctions may be applied by the Council's Disciplinary Committee. These include the imposition of conditions on a teacher's registration at one end of the spectrum to suspension or removal from the Register of Teachers at the other. Ultimately, though it is up to the school's BOM to dismiss a teacher.

As mentioned previously, at the time of writing the Teaching Council's investigation and disciplinary functions have not yet come into effect. However, it appears that the Minister plans to introduce these functions in the near future. In the meantime, the Council has been pro-active in making the appropriate preparations for its role in this area, and has already established an Investigating Committee (11 members) and a Disciplinary Committee (13 members), as well as drafting the Rules of Procedure for Disciplinary Panels (The Teaching Council, 2010). The members of these committees are drawn from the organisation's Council, which comprises 37 members, representing a wide range of stakeholders in education in Ireland.

One of the Council's long-term objectives is that the learning outcomes, which have been defined for the initial teacher education phase would be reflected in progressively more advanced standards across all phases of the teaching career. At the heart of this approach is the identification and monitoring of standards and levels of individual accountability, such as those proposed in the draft-revised code of professional conduct that was referred to earlier. The issue of the dominance of the teaching profession, however, gives rise to questions about the kind of change it will instigate. This issue was highlighted by Mathews (2010) who found that:

Support service participants articulate frustration at the fact that inspectors do not focus on individual teachers and principals assert that WSE should identify poor teaching with a view to changing the scenario. They are critical of the responsibility placed on schools in this regard when they lack any mechanism to deal effectively with poor teaching or with complaints about teachers (Mathews, 2010: 151).

3.5.3 Internal Arrangements for Monitoring and Evaluation

The Teaching Council, since it was established in 2006, has utilised a consultative approach in carrying out its business, similar to the consultation during 2011 in

relation to the revision of the 2007 Code of Practice. This approach has enabled the Council to draw on the knowledge, expertise and support of a range of stakeholders and experts in primary and post-primary education in Ireland. This work is enabled by the representative nature of the organisation's Board described earlier in this section.

The Teaching Council assesses and measures progress against its annual business plans, which emanate from the organisation's Strategic Plan. The Council published its second Strategic Plan 2012–2014 at the beginning of 2012. The Council engaged the assistance of external consultants to undertake a review of the organisation and support the development of the plan. The process comprised an environmental analysis, which included surveys and interviews with teachers and other key stakeholders about their perceptions of the Council and its work.

The Council also commissions research and consults regularly with the partners in education²⁹ and the wider education community on professional matters. Through its research bursary schemes, the Council promotes and facilitates research by registered teachers as part of their professional development. It also supports others carrying out research in the areas of teaching, learning and assessment, for example, by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment.

While it is still very early days in the life of the Teaching Council it has, however, been the focus of some criticism from teachers, particularly in relation to the manner in which the registration of teachers was initiated, and which has resulted in the inclusion on the Register of some unqualified personnel. There have also been some questions among teachers, who have to pay a €90 annual fee, in relation to what the Council is doing for them for that fee. This may have something to do with the fact that, at the time of writing, there were still elements of the Teaching Council Act 2001 to be commenced, and that this has had a limiting effect on the perceived benefits among teachers who are registered with the Teaching Council. Until such time as the full Act is commenced, it will be difficult for the Council to utilise its potential powers that are provided under the Act.

²⁹ The partners in education are Boards of Management representatives, parents' representatives and teacher unions.

Chapter 4

Inspection and Evaluation

4.1 Programmes of Inspection and Evaluation in the School System

This chapter describes the internal and external frameworks and arrangements for school evaluation and monitoring in primary and post-primary schools in Ireland.

Improvement and accountability are the two main purposes of school inspection and evaluation approaches. School accountability aims to provide information to policy makers and the public about value for money, compliance with standards and regulation, and the quality of the services provided (OECD, 2009b). Three dimensions of accountability are particularly relevant for school evaluation:

- Contractual accountability is externally directed, and focuses on meeting the requirements of the school system and contributing to improve its quality;
- Moral accountability is focused on meeting the needs of parents and students; and
- Professional accountability is focused on meeting one's expectations and those of colleagues and is more internally directed (OECD, 2009b: 7).

4.2 School Self-evaluation

Ireland's approach to quality assurance, which emphasises school development planning through internal school review and self-evaluation with the support of external evaluation, is in many respects similar to what is happening in other European countries (Department of Education and Science, 2003).

In 2003, the DES published *Looking at our Schools* (LAOS) which sets out the framework against which both primary and post-primary schools are measured and reviewed. It was published as a set of self-evaluation guidelines for schools and teachers, and provides a common language that is understood by the inspectors and schools. It is also used by the Inspectorate as the basis for the evaluation framework in conducting Whole School Evaluations and other external evaluations of the work of primary and post-primary schools, which are described later in this chapter.

The areas that are contained in the self-evaluation and review guidelines at both primary and post-primary level are:

- Quality of school management;
- Quality of school planning;
- Quality of curriculum provision;
- Quality of learning and teaching in curriculum areas; and
- Quality of support for pupils.

Each of these *areas* is divided into a number of *aspects*, which represent the different activities collectively constituting the *area* of the school that is to be evaluated. The *aspects* are further broken down into *components* for which a number of *themes* have been identified as a basis for evaluation (see Box 4.1). The extent to which each of the areas, and its attending aspects and components, are relevant to a school will be influenced by the context factors that apply to the school (Department of Education and Science, 2003).

The LAOS framework was designed to support self-evaluation in schools and incorporates a whole range of areas that schools might decide to focus on, as outlined in Table 4.1 below. It was the intention of the DES not to be prescriptive and, therefore, the LAOS framework did not include guidelines and/or instructions about how it might be used by schools and their teachers.³⁰ This feature is seen as a weakness by McNamara and O’Hara (2012), who state the following:

Schools are invited to make statements regarding each area, aspect, or component evaluated based on “a continuum consisting of a number of reference points representing stages of development in the improvement process” (DES 2003, p. x). The continuum encompasses four descriptors: (a) significant strengths (uniformly strong), (b) strengths outweigh weaknesses (more strengths than weaknesses), (c) weaknesses outweigh strengths (more weaknesses than strengths), and (d) significant major weaknesses (uniformly weak). The assumption here is that schools have the skills and resources to gather evidence and make these judgements. However and crucially none of these four descriptors or indeed any of the themes for self-evaluation are connected to benchmarks or performance criteria so it is impossible to say what level of performance is regarded by the Inspectorate as appropriate in each case. This in turn makes it impossible for schools to

³⁰ There was no mandatory requirement for schools to produce a self-evaluation report. This will become a requirement under the new National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy which, will be described later in Section 5.4.

place themselves on this continuum even if they have carried out self evaluation and therefore the assumption is unrealistic (ibid.: 6).

School self-evaluation is a prominent feature in public school systems in a number of countries including Australia, New Zealand, England, Scotland, Canada, Hong Kong, Singapore, Finland and the Netherlands. Even where independent inspection systems are established, the potential value of school self-evaluation is increasingly acknowledged:

The self-evaluating and self-improving school is the school that has the in-built resilience to meet change, as well as the internal capacity and know-how to assess its strengths and weaknesses and build its development planning on that solid foundation (Riley & MacBeath, 2000: 1).

Box 4.1 Areas, Aspect and Components of Primary School Activity

Area	Aspects	Components
Quality of school management	Aspect A: Characteristic spirit of the schools	Statement of the characteristic spirit of the schools Relationships and communication within the schools community
	Aspect B: School ownership and management	Role of patrons, trustees and owners Composition, role and functioning of the board of management Operation of the Board of Management Board of management's policies and procedures
	Aspect C: In-school management	Management of staff Management of pupils Management of relationships with parents and the wider community Management of resources Self-evaluation
Quality of Planning	Aspect A The School Plan	Planning process Content of the school plan
	Aspect B Implementation of the school plan	Implementation and impact of the school plan Monitoring and evaluation of the school plan, leading to reviews
Quality of curriculum provision	Aspect A Curriculum planning and organisation	Curriculum provision Breadth & balance across curriculum areas Deployment of staff and timetabling

	Aspect B Co-curricular and extra-curricular provision	Activities that support and enhance learning (co-curricular activities) Extra-curricular opportunities
Quality of teaching and learning in curriculum areas	Aspect A Planning and preparation	Planning of work Planning of resources
	Aspect B Teaching and learning	Methodology Classroom management Classroom atmosphere Learning
	Aspect C Assessment and achievement	Assessment modes and outcomes Record-keeping and reporting Pupil engagement in curriculum area Overall pupil achievement in curriculum area
Quality of support for pupils	Aspect A Provision for pupils with special educational needs	Principles underlying provision for pupils with special educational needs Provision for pupils with general and specific learning disabilities Exceptionally able and talented pupils Pupils with physical and sensory disabilities Pupils with behaviour problems or emotional disturbance Pupils with specific speech and language disorder Pupils with autistic spectrum disorder
	Aspect B1: Provision for pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds	Principles underlying provision and support for pupils School's provision and support for pupils
	Aspect B2 Provision for pupils from minority groups	Principles underlying provision and support for pupils School's provision and support for pupils
	Aspect C Social, personal and health education	Guidance policy and organisation of programme Implementation of guidance policy
	Aspect D Supporting the pupil – home school and community	Pupil care within school Provision for co-operation between school, home and community Involvement of pupils in the organisation of school activities

Source Looking at our school: An aid to self-evaluation in primary schools, Department of Education and Science (2003)

The Finnish education system provides a good example in this regard, particularly in relation to the organisation of special education services. The Finnish system, especially at primary level, is seen as one of the best in the world. All primary teachers have to have a Master's qualification and the technical expertise to diagnose potential learning difficulties, and knowledge of the appropriate intervention for individual pupils, (see Box 4.2).

Box 4.2 The Finnish Education System

Recent research undertaken by Sabel *et al.*, (2011) on the Finnish education system describes a shift from a culture of control to a culture of trust. During the 1980s and 1990s, the governance of Finland's schools was transformed through the delegation of authority for curriculum development and the evaluation of learning outcomes to local schools and municipalities. This gave local schools and municipalities the authority to plan their own goals, curricula and activities with respect to local circumstances or interests. The 1985 curriculum also gave teachers and their schools control over the selection of teaching methods and the evaluation of learning outcomes (Sabel *et al.*, 2011: 23). Since 1994, the national core curricula in Finland have concentrated mainly on the target results of learning and skills. Self-evaluation in Finnish schools is part of the deliberate development of the curriculum and is recognised as a necessary means of creating a productive school. As such, self-evaluation is an integral part of each school's approach to curriculum development. This shift in emphasis towards self-evaluation coincided with the dismantling of the inspection system and the elimination of all forms of central control of teachers' work (Sabel *et al.*, 2011: 25).

According to the author, decentralisation of authority and accountability contributed to the greater levels of experimentation in schools, where teachers increasingly collaborated with other local professionals as well as with other teachers and researchers around the country to experiment, share information and learn about new research results and tools.

The Organisation of Special Education Services

A core principle of the Finnish special education system is early identification of learning difficulties and immediate provision of sufficient support to meet the school's learning objectives while allowing the student to remain in class with his/her peers (Sabel *et al.*, 2011: 28).

In Finland there is an emphasis on identification of any difficulties that might exist for a child before he/she even starts school. Regular free assessments of the physical, mental and social development of newborn and pre-school children is provided by a network of child health clinics which are located across the country. Multi-professional teams comprising a public-health nurse, medical doctor, speech therapist and a psychologist, if necessary, do the evaluations. These checks are carried out according to national guidelines that specify the timetable for child well-being checks.

This commitment to early diagnosis and intervention in learning problems has brought about the development of a nationwide network of university-based researchers, continuing education providers, and developers of specialised screening, diagnostic and remedial teaching tools (Sabel *et al.*, 2011: 32).

Finland places a very high value on education, which is supported by a very strong focus on teacher recruitment, training and development.

In its recent response to the Department of Public Expenditure and Review Organisational Review Programme (ORP) Report 2012, the DES stated its commitment to encouraging BOMs and school communities to engage in robust self-review and ongoing improvement of teaching and learning in their schools and centres for education by providing relevant support materials. At the time of writing it is not known what the DES is specifically intending to do to meet this commitment. However, some of this commitment was partially demonstrated by the DES with the launch of the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy in 2011, which will require schools to undertake self-evaluation³¹ (see Section 5.4), and in January 2012 the launch of two sets of pilot materials to support (i) primary school self-evaluation and (ii) post-primary school self-evaluation. These school self-evaluation guidelines have been prepared by the DES Inspectorate to provide practical support to schools in undertaking self-evaluation. According to the Inspectorate, they represent a development of the previous guidance on school self-evaluation contained in the LAOS document. The guidelines focus on the evaluation of teaching and learning as an essential starting point for school self-evaluation. It is also expected that schools and teachers will reflect on the provision in literacy and numeracy as part of the self-evaluation process (Department of Education and Skills, 2011e: 6).

4.3 Whole School Evaluation

Chiming with school accountability approaches in other parts of the world,³² the Irish Inspectorate launched the Whole School Evaluation (WSE) initiative in 1996. However, there followed a number of years of negotiation with teachers, unions in relation to the arrangements and content of the proposed WSE initiative, so it was not until during the school year 2003–04 that the phased implementation of WSE commenced in primary and second-level schools. From the outset, WSE was viewed and promoted as a contributory tool in the assurance of quality in the Irish educational system. It is a process of external evaluation of the work of a school carried out by the Department of Education and Skills Inspectorate Division. The WSE process is designed to evaluate key aspects of the work of a school and deals with the work of the school as a whole. It affirms positive aspects of the school's work and suggests areas for development (Department of Education and Skills, 2010a).

³¹ The Programme for Government and the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy have clearly signalled that school self-evaluation and the production of a self-evaluation report will be mandatory from the school year 2013–2014.

³² Many school accountability systems, for example in England and Scotland, have long-established external inspection models. Other countries such as New Zealand, Netherlands and some Australian states are also considering introducing them. Many systems have developed accountability frameworks, which feature common components including school planning, school self-assessment, school reports and internal and/or external school review.

Whole School Evaluations are carried out in accordance with Section 7(2)(b) and Section 13(3)(a)(i) of the Education Act 1998. This act places an obligation on the board and staff of a school to afford inspectors every reasonable facility and co-operation in the performance of their duties. The DES consulted with a range of education stakeholders during the development of the WSE, which is designed to:

- Facilitate the full participation of the whole school community in the evaluation process;
- Contribute to school development by affirming good practice in schools and ensure that advice and support are available to schools to help further development;
- Ensure school and system accountability by providing objective, dependable, high-quality data on the operation of the individual school and the system as a whole;
- Enable teachers and schools to use the criteria for school self-review and improvement, so as to encourage other quality assurance approaches; and
- Contribute to system development by providing information that can inform the discussion and modification of education policies (Department of Education and Science, 2004: 14).

School evaluation under WSE includes a range of activities and meetings (see Box 4.3) involving the school principal, teachers, members of parents' councils/associations and members of the school's Board of Management. It also comprises school and classroom visits by the inspector during which they observe in classrooms, and interact with students and their teachers. During these visits the inspectors also examine school planning documentation and teachers' written preparation. At the end of the process a draft report is prepared by the inspection team and a series of post-inspection meetings take place with the school principal and staff, and representatives of the Board of Management. The WSE report is then finalised and issued to the school.

Box 4.3 WSE Procedures and Processes – Primary Level

Evaluation Teams

A regional assistant chief inspector nominates the reporting inspector and the evaluation team for each Whole School Evaluation. The number of inspectors who work on the evaluation team is determined by the size of the school. The reporting inspector has overall responsibility for the organisation and co-ordination of the WSE.

First Steps: pre evaluation meetings

Whole School Evaluation is a collaborative process involving the evaluation team, the teaching staff, management of the school, parents and pupils. The patron and trustees of the school may also be involved in the process. At various stages during the WSE, members of the school community have opportunities to interact with the evaluation team to discuss their work, their role and their vision for the school. These interactions provide the evaluation team with insights into the school context, structure and dynamics.

In-school evaluation

During the WSE, management and planning, teaching and learning, and supports for pupils are evaluated through classroom observation and interaction. This enables the evaluation team to identify and affirm the strengths of the school and to make clear recommendations on areas for development and improvement.

Post-evaluation meetings

After the in-school evaluation phase of the process is completed, the evaluation team facilitates a meeting with members of the teaching staff to discuss the findings and recommendations of the evaluation team. The reporting inspector also convenes a meeting to which board members, the patron's representative and a representative of the parents' association are invited. During these meetings the work of the school is discussed and the findings of the evaluation are outlined. The school's strengths and areas for further development are also presented.

The WSE evaluation report

The WSE report takes a holistic view of the school as an organisation. It affirms positive aspects of a school's work and suggests areas for development. The report provides an external view of the work of the school. The intention is that the report's findings and recommendations will facilitate development and improvement in the work of the school and school self-evaluation. The report is issued to the school concerned, and is published on the website of the Department of Education and Skills.

School self-evaluation

Schools contribute significantly to improving quality through school self-evaluation. The Inspectorate's publication entitled *Looking at our School – An Aid to Self-Evaluation in Primary Schools* (2003) provides schools with a framework for supporting an internal review of school policies and procedures and for promoting school effectiveness and improvement in the broad areas of management, planning, learning and teaching, and supports for pupils. This self-evaluation framework is also used by DES Inspectors in conducting the WSE evaluation and as a basis for other external evaluations.

Reviewing evaluations and inspection reports

The Education Action 1998 provides for the publication by the Inspectorate of a Procedure of Review of Inspections on Schools and Teachers (2006). Under this procedure a teacher or the board of a school may request the Chief Inspector to review any inspection carried out by an inspector that affects the teacher or the school. The review procedure applies to all inspections affecting schools or teachers, including all reports arising from such evaluations.

Source A Guide to Whole-School Evaluation in Primary Schools Department of Education and Skills (2010a)

4.3.1 WSE in Primary Schools

The DES monitors and evaluates the WSE process in consultation with its 'education partners'.³³ In June 2010, following a consultation process, the DES published a revised Guide for Whole-School Evaluation in Primary Schools, which contains a number of key changes to the original process in relation to:

- **What is evaluated** – as before, WSE takes into account the school context, school management and support for pupils with special needs. However, from now on inspectors will generally examine teaching, learning and pupil achievement in four subject areas, including English, Irish and mathematics and one additional subject determined by the Inspectorate. The Board of Management of the school may also request the addition of a fifth subject;
- **Focused discussion with pupils** – inspectors may also collect information on the views of pupils through a focused discussion with the committee of the students' council where one has been established in a school or through a discussion with a group of pupils selected by the inspectors. A teacher will also be invited to be present when the inspector meets pupils in this way;
- **Questionnaires** – the latest enhancement to the evidence base has been the addition of student and parent questionnaires in all inspections. A copy of the questionnaire is provided to the principal. Questionnaires to pupils, if used, are administered under the supervision of an inspector and in the presence of the relevant teacher or teachers. Questionnaires for parents will be distributed to parents and returned in sealed envelopes to the school for the attention of the reporting inspector. These questionnaires, however, do not seek information regarding individual teachers and any unsolicited comments regarding individual teachers are disregarded (INTO, 2010: 10).

Box 4.4 provides example of the summary findings contained in a recent WSE primary school report.

³³ Partners in education are boards' of management representatives, parents' representatives and teacher unions.

Box 4.4 Sample of a Primary School Whole School Evaluation Report 2011 – Summary Findings, Recommendations and the BOM Response

The following are the main strengths of the work of the school:

- Both the Board of Management and the parent body are active, committed and effective;
- A strong spirit of partnership and collegiality characterises the atmosphere in the school;
- The teaching staff is very open to taking on new ideas and practices and to engaging in continuing professional development;
- The quality of teaching and learning in the curricular areas evaluated is, in general, good and of a very high standard in some instances;
- Very effective provision is made for pupils with learning difficulties and for those with identified special educational needs.

The following main recommendations are made:

- The school should focus on developing a strong culture of whole-school self-evaluation and review;
- The Board of Management should issue an annual report on the operation of the school;
- As a means of strengthening parental engagement in the development of school policy, the school should encourage the formation of a parents' association;
- The school's planning is in need of further development and a time-bound action plan is recommended.

School response to the report – Submitted by the Board of Management

Area 1 Observations on the content of the inspection report

The Board of Management and staff welcome this report. They wish to acknowledge the courteous and professional manner in which the Whole School Evaluation was carried out. The Board is happy that the dedication and conscientiousness of all parties involved in the effective school management have been acknowledged and is pleased that the high standard in Irish, English, mathematics and physical education has been noted by the inspector. We look forward to the further development of the school to enhance the educational opportunities we provide to the community.

Area 2 Follow-up actions planned or undertaken since the completion of the inspection activity to implement the findings and recommendations of the inspection

- The Board of Management will issue an annual report on the operation of the school.
- A parents' council has been formulated.
- A three-year action plan has been agreed at Board level.
- The school will work towards whole-school self-evaluation and review.

4.3.2 WSE in Post-primary Schools

The WSE format at second level is very similar to that at first level but has traditionally focused on a specific subject or set of subjects rather than the entire curriculum. The newer form of WSE at post-primary-level, WSE-MLL, which will be described in the next section, involves the inspection of a range of lessons across the curriculum and across the levels of the school. There are also some differences in procedures, depending on the nature of the second-level school and its governance structures. Box 4.5 contains the different elements of the WSE process and procedures at second level.

Box 4.5 The WSE Procedures and Processes – Post-Primary Level

Pre-evaluation phase

1. Notification of WSE to principal, Board, trustees (or CEO of VEC) by an assistant chief inspector.
2. Reporting inspector liaises with the school and schedules pre-evaluation meetings.
3. Principal completes school information form.
4. Subject co-ordinators or subject teachers complete information forms on subjects to be evaluated.
5. Pre-evaluation meetings with the CEO of the VEC (where the school is a VEC school), with the trustee(s) if requested, with the board of management, with the principal and deputy principal(s), with the parents' representatives and with the teaching staff.

In-school evaluation phase

6. Review of school-related documents.
7. Meetings and interviews with the in-school management team, subject teachers, and the school planning, education support and pastoral care teams.
8. Observation of teaching and learning.
9. Interaction with students.
10. Review of students' work.
11. Feedback to individual teachers and to the principal.

Post-evaluation meetings and reporting

12. Preparation of draft report.
13. Meeting with the board of management.
14. Meeting with the teaching staff.
15. Factual verification of draft report with principal and the Board of Management.
16. Issue of report to chairperson of the board of management and to the principal.

Source A Guide to Whole-School Evaluation in Post-Primary Schools, Department of Education and Science (2006b)

A recent study of the WSE indicated that there is a perception among teachers that the self-evaluation element of the WSE and the LAOS framework is a once-off process rather than an ongoing developmental process between WSE and other inspections. The research also indicates that teachers do not readily see the connection between their School Development Planning Processes, ongoing self-evaluation and evaluation by the Inspectorate (McNamara & O'Hara, 2008). Although there may be caveats about the reliability of this study based upon its small sample size, it nevertheless illustrates a perennial problem of regulation: namely how does one connect internal and external processes.

There has been an amount of scepticism, particularly in the early days, about the value of WSE reports. Some of this scepticism relates to the fact that schools receive advance notice of the inspection, that BOMs have the opportunity to have sight of the report and verify the facts³⁴ prior to its publication, and that individual teachers cannot be identified in the report. While the involvement of parents and pupils has been part of WSE since its inception, it was limited to members of the parents' council in the school and within the post-primary-sector to student focus-group interviews. As outlined previously in Section 4.3.1, the WSE process was revised in 2010 to include arrangements to harness the views of all parents and pupils directly through the use of questionnaires. Parent representatives are also invited to attend the meeting between the inspector and the BOM to discuss the outcomes of the WSE process before the report is published. A brief review of WSE written reports indicates that they have become more specific, for example, in relation to the need for schools to improve their planning arrangements, involve parents in policy development and review, and to become more systematic in the administration and interpretation of school-based assessments. According to the DES Inspectorate, inspectors are increasingly following up with schools. This is being done through incidental inspection visits to see if, and how, the school is addressing recommendations and suggestions contained in the reports. The School Improvement Group, described earlier in 3.1.3 can also become involved.

4.3.3 Whole School Evaluation: Management, Leadership and Learning Inspections at Post-primary Level (WSE-MLL)

In 2011, the DES introduced a new evaluation initiative for post-primary schools. This initiative, 'Whole-School Evaluation-Management, Leadership and Learning' (WSE-MLL), is a process of external evaluation of the work of post-primary schools carried out by the Inspectorate of the DES. As one of a range of evaluation models employed by the inspectorate, WSE-MLL complements the standard WSE model described previously. Box 4.6 below provides a summary of the themes that are contained in a WSE-MLL report (2011).

³⁴ Schools can point to errors of fact in the report but may not seek changes to the judgements made by inspectors.

Box 4.6 Whole School Evaluation: Management, Leadership and Learning Report Template

- 1. Summary of findings and recommendations for further development**
 - 1.1 Key findings**
 - 1.2 Recommendations for further development**
- 2. Quality of School Management and Leadership**
 - 2.1 School ownership and management – the Board of Management**
 - **Composition, functioning and fulfilment of statutory obligations**
 - **The school’s priorities for development**
 - 2.2 Effectiveness of leadership for learning**
 - **Leadership of staff**
 - **Leadership of students**
 - 2.3 Management of facilities**
- 3. Quality of learning and teaching**
 - 3.1 The quality of learning and teaching**
- 4. Implementation of recommendations from previous evaluations**
 - 4.1 Management**
 - 4.2 Learning and teaching**
- 5. The school’s self-evaluation process and capacity for school improvement**

Source Whole-School Evaluation - Management, Leadership and Learning (WSE-MLL) Report Template, 19.01.11

The process aims to facilitate quality assurance of schools and to enhance quality through fostering school improvement. The WSE-MLL evaluation is intended to complement the school’s own development planning and, unlike the traditional WSE model, it provides the school with opportunities to demonstrate its own self-evaluation processes. It focuses on whole-school issues relating to management, leadership, planning, teaching, learning and assessment, as well as the school’s progress in, and capacity for, self-evaluation. The process also reviews recommendations arising from previous inspections, for example, subject inspections and programme evaluations. This facilitates close examination of the

development and improvement undertaken by the school following these evaluations and in between visits by the inspectorate (Department of Education and Skills, 2011d).

Unlike the established WSE, where post-primary schools not only get three weeks' notice of a pending WSE process, but are also advised of which subjects have been nominated for deeper inspection, the arrangements for the WSE-MLL does not include the inspection of subjects. Instead, a range of lessons across the curriculum, and across the levels of the school are selected for inspection. Teachers are not informed of the lessons to be visited until the morning of each day of the inspection. While this is challenging, and has caused some anxiety for teachers who have participated in the piloting of the new process, the introduction of the WSE-MLL appears to be viewed as a positive development, according to one post-primary representative:

.... once people or schools who were involved in the pilot project went through it [WSE-MLL] they actually saw it as a reasonably positive move

Box 4.7 provides a summary of findings and recommendations for further development contained in a post-primary WSE-MLL Report.

Box 4.7 Sample of Summary of Findings and Recommendations Contained in a Post-Primary WSE-MLL Report (March 2011)

Key findings

- The Board of Management is very effective.
- There is a highly effective senior management team who are aware of preserving the traditions of the school along with facilitating the changes needed to provide for present and future students.
- The management and organisation of the school were fully endorsed in parent responses to questionnaires.
- The school has an open and welcoming admissions practice. The welcome afforded to each and every student on enrolment received unanimous praise in the parent questionnaires.
- A dynamic students' council, prefect system and mentoring process are in place.
- The parent-teacher association takes an active part in the life of the school.
- Communication between the school and parents is effective.
- Arrangements for students' choice of subjects are well managed.
- The school's provision of extra-curricular and co-curricular activities is to be praised.
- Subject department plans have been compiled but further development is required.
- The quality of teaching and learning observed during the inspection was good and, in some instances, very good.
- A very good relationship between teachers and students was in evidence.
- The Board of Governors, together with school management and staff, are to be praised for striving towards the creation of an inclusive environment, consistent with the school's ethos.
- Provision for the care of students is very good.
- Genuine attempts have been made to implement the recommendations of previous evaluation reports.

Recommendations for further development

- School management and staff should devise policies on relationships and sexuality education (RSE), whole-school literacy and numeracy, for ratification by the Board of Management.
- Any expansion of the current curriculum provision should include a technology subject.
- A review of the school's post structure should identify how best the changing needs of the school can be supported on an ongoing basis.
- A broader range of learning support delivery methods should be explored.
- In their subject planning, teachers should now focus on learning outcomes, mixed-ability learning situations and ongoing sharing and discussion of teaching and learning methods.
- Planned learning outcomes should be communicated to students at the outset of lessons, be referred to during the lesson and be used as a framework to check understanding, during the recapitulation phase

Source Department of Education and Skills website:
http://www.education.ie/insreports/school_inspection_report_listing.htm

4.3.4 Publication of School Inspection Reports

In line with trends in other countries, the Education Act 1998 places a duty on inspectors to report the outcome of their evaluation of schools to the Minister, the Board of Management of the school, teachers, parents and the school patron. A large number of inspections culminate in the publication of reports. Since 2006, WSE inspection reports have been published on the DES website, which, at the time of writing, contains approximately 4,500 individual reports and includes reports arising from WSE, WSE-MLL and curriculum implementation and subject inspections. The publishing of reports is deemed to make an important contribution to the promotion of accountability, improvement and quality in the education system (Department of Education and Science, 2006b). The publication of school inspection reports also reflects the Inspectorate's desire to:

- Acknowledge and affirm good practice in schools;
- Provide an assurance of quality in the education system;
- Identify areas for development and contribute to real improvement in schools;
- Encourage school self-review and development;
- Ensure a wider dissemination of good practice in and among schools;
- Provide authoritative and balanced information on the effectiveness of schools;
- Provide valuable information to parents, prospective parents and students; and
- Promote greater accountability (Department of Education and Science, 2006a: 3).

It is worth noting that while the DES Inspectorate is statutorily required to inspect and publish inspection reports on individual schools, it does not have the authority to tell a school what to do with the reports, or indeed to implement what might be considered the ultimate sanction, i.e., of school closure. In fact, no school has ever been closed down due to serious underperformance issues. Instead, the School Improvement Group, working with other sections in the DES, for example, the School Governance Section and the Primary Professional Development Service (described earlier in Section 3.1), the Board of Management and patron of the school, may initiate an integrated support process in order to improve the situation. According to DES representatives, a significant number of schools have experienced major improvements as a result of the work of the School Improvement Group, as outlined in Section 3.1.3. The WSE system is therefore characterised by an emphasis on co-operation and collaboration, an expectation that schools and teachers engage in self-evaluation, coupled with monitoring by the Inspectorate. Professional and organisational development is prioritised ahead of accountability, and naming and shaming of teachers or schools, and comparisons and league tables are forbidden by law (McNamara & O'Hara, 2008: 77). This approach is akin to

Braithwaite's supportive pyramid of responsive regulation, (as opposed to a sanctions model), where the 'regulators' begin at the bottom of the pyramid with a presumption that many people will act in a virtuous manner and will be stimulated through a combination of persuasion and praise, (see Section 1.2) (NESC, 2011). DES support service personnel and principals, however, have expressed concerns about recommendations contained in WSE reports stating that they:

are still too general and a bit toothless and while this gentle approach might have been necessary in the early days of external evaluation, it is not acceptable where students are getting an unjust deal (Mathews, 2010: 148).

McNamara and O'Hara (2008) note that the DES Inspectorate's approach is in line with international trends. However, the authors state that due to the avoidance of conflict with teachers and their representatives, the WSE model demonstrates a number of weaknesses, in particular, the reluctance among schools and teachers to engage in systematic approaches to data collection and analysis that are necessary to support improved performance (McNamara & O'Hara, 2008: 78).

Notwithstanding the above, according to both primary and post-primary representatives, in their experience teachers are becoming more favourably disposed towards the WSE process. While the process can create a focused period of preparation that can add to the workload and cause anxiety for many teachers, teachers have indicated that the experience is usually much more positive and affirming than they had expected. Some teachers have reported that it is the first time that they have felt affirmed in their work and profession.

4.3.5 Incidental Inspections

In the last number of years there has been a move towards more outcome-focused evaluation, which has influenced the models of inspection that are used by the DES, for example, the introduction of incidental inspections, which are unannounced visits designed to evaluate the quality and effectiveness of aspects of the education provided in schools under the normal conditions of a regular school day. Until recently, these inspections have only taken place in primary schools. In June 2011, the DES announced the commencement of consultations with the 'education partners'³⁵ in relation to the introduction of incidental inspections in post-primary schools. On completion of the consultation process, incidental inspections commenced in second-level schools in November 2011. Incidental inspections are now being routinely conducted in both primary and post-primary schools.

Incidental inspections in primary schools require inspectors to spend a day in a particular school. During this time they are specifically focused on the quality of the

³⁵ The education partners include Board of Management representative, parents representatives, and the teacher unions.

education experienced and outcomes achieved by learners. In order to do this they visit classrooms for about one and a half hours where they are involved in:

- Discussion with the class teacher;
- Observation of teaching and learning;
- Interaction with pupils;
- Review of the teacher's planning and other documentation; and
- Feedback to the teacher.

As well as evaluating the work of teachers' inspectors also discuss the educational provision in the school with the school principal.

An oral report is provided to the principal at the end of the same day. The classroom teachers are also provided with oral feedback in their classroom settings. The advice and/or recommendations that are provided by the inspector are usually focused on aspects for development intended to improve the quality of the pupils' learning. According to the Inspectorate, this approach facilitates a systematic review of student performance. However, this is only one aspect of improving performance in schools. The degree to which it can be described as systematic in the absence, for example, of regular self-review and the availability of data on student and school performance will be discussed later in Chapter 6. The incidental inspection model complements other inspection processes and evaluation visits, and does not normally result in a written report to the school (Department of Education and Skills, 2011c). However, the information and lessons arising from the visits are shared within the school system via the publication of composite reports. During 2010, the DES published a composite report of incidental inspections conducted in over 450 primary schools between October 2009 and October 2010. The focus of this report is on the quality of pupils' learning and practices of teachers in the curriculum areas of English and mathematics.

The incidental inspection report highlights evidence of good practice in schools as well as areas where improvement is required. It is intended to support improvement in schools and sets out steps that teachers, principals and the educational system in general can take to improve specific curriculum areas (see Box 4.8).

Box 4.8 Incidental Inspection Findings

An example of a school with a number of significant strengths in the teaching of English is reported as follows:

There is a clear focus on developing good listening skills at each class level. Reading is approached in a carefully structured fashion with a high level of collaboration between classroom and support teachers. In the middle standard developing confidence and fluency in reading is emphasised and this is very competently developed at senior level through use of the novel. The senior pupils are given ample opportunities to present written tasks and project work, to express their opinions and to engage in discussion and debate.

Example of the advice given to schools by the inspectors regarding teaching approaches in English lessons include:

Pupils would benefit from additional pair work to optimise the development of their expressive language skills in ... English.

Less emphasis should be placed on textbook and workbook activities in middle and senior classes during lessons in English.

Source A Report on the Teaching and Learning of English and Mathematics in Primary Schools, Department of Education and Skills (2010b)

Subject inspection is a further inspection model with distinctive criteria regarding the evaluation of subject departments in post-primary schools and the teaching and learning of individual subjects. National analysis of the outcomes of subject inspections have been used to compile a series of reports which provide guidance on good practice in the teaching of individual subjects. Box 4.9 provides for an example of an inspector's report following a post-primary subject inspection of mathematics.

Box 4.9 Example of a Post-Primary Subject Inspection of Mathematics Report 2011

Main Findings

The quality of teaching and learning in mathematics was very good particularly where the integration of resources created a clear context for the material being covered.

Mathematics is strongly supported on the timetable and the mathematics department is very well resourced.

The formal and informal assessment of student progress in mathematics is very thorough and well organised.

Provision for students with special educational needs or in need of learning support in mathematics is very good.

Subject department planning in mathematics is very well managed and the mathematics department operates in a collaborative and reflective fashion.

Main recommendations

The number of class periods allocated to mathematics in First Year should be increased by one period per week.

All students transferring into First Year should sit a mathematics competency test, the outcomes of which should inform the design, delivery and assessment of the First-Year mathematics programme.

The mathematics programme in Transition Year should be restructured to include a core supplemented by a number of modules. The core should seek to address any shortcomings in the students' skills set

Source DES website: http://www.education.ie/insreports/school_inspection_report_listing.htm

The Inspectorate has developed inspection observation guides and criteria so that all of their inspection processes are underpinned by a clear framework. For example, the Inspectorate's guide to subject inspection at second level includes:

- Code of Practice for subject inspection;
- Advance planning and preparation guidelines;
- Procedures for the inspection visit;
- Guidelines for classroom visits and observations;
- A template to record the evidence; and
- A subject Inspection Report template.

The total number of inspections carried out during 2011 was 3,783 including 389 whole-school-type evaluations in primary and post-primary schools. Inspections were carried out in over one-sixth of primary schools and in over 600 of the 740 post-primary schools (Hislop, 2012: 16).

4.3.6 Use of Evidence from Inspections

The DES Inspectorate emphasises an evidence-based approach so it is not surprising that there is a strong emphasis on the role of the inspector as an observer in the classroom. However, the DES emphasis on evidence-based approaches does not seem to have been a characteristic of evaluations of schools outside of the classroom, for example, in the administration of the school, at least in the early days of the roll-out of the WSE. According to McNamara and O'Hara, despite a general view that Irish schools are not data rich, there are significant sources of information available including absentee lists, lateness lists, in-class assessments, etc. What is noteworthy is that, at least in the early stages of the WSE roll-out, there has been little indication that the inspectors chose to examine these information sources. As a result, the idea that this evaluation system was somewhat evidence-free was suggested in more than one school community (McNamara & O'Hara, 2012: 14). According to DES representatives there has been substantial engagement with evidence regarding student attendance, in-class assessment and the outcomes of standardised tests and examinations where such data were available at school level.

4.3.7 Individual Teacher Evaluation Schemes

There is strong evidence to suggest that one of the main drivers of the variation in student learning at school is the quality of the teachers (McKinsey & Company, 2007).

The quality of an education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers (McKinsey & Company, 2007: 16).

The McKinsey report, (2007), cites reference to seminal research that was undertaken ten years previously based on data from Tennessee, which showed that if two average eight-year-old students were given different teachers – one of them a high performer, the other a low performer – their performance diverged by more than 50 percentile points within three years (McKinsey & Company, 2007: 12). The authors also state that the negative impact of low-performing teachers is severe, particularly during the earlier years of schooling.

The question here is can there be confidence in the quality of teachers in Ireland in the absence of individual teacher evaluation arrangements. One of the key arguments against individual teacher evaluation reflects the fears of many in the profession that they would be unfairly assessed against pupil learning outcomes, which are also influenced by many factors outside of a teacher's control. In addition, there is a view that individual teacher evaluation schemes can 'undermine the notion of the school as a collective learning community where the end result is a reflection of collective efforts over a period of 5 to 6 years.'

There is an expectation, however, that teachers would engage with the self-evaluation aspect of the WSE that is contained in the LAOS guidelines to aid self-evaluation for both primary and second-level schools and referred to previously. Research undertaken by McNamara and O'Hara (2008) indicates that not only is the level of self-evaluation activity among teachers in Ireland very low, but so are the technical skills that are required to undertake self-evaluation, since self-evaluation has not been an integral part of their early training and professional development. These views are supported by the education stakeholders who contributed to this report. This is contrary to the approach in many countries, where the demands for instructional quality have led to the establishment of a range of teaching performance assessment arrangements.

However, there is no one approach or methodology. Data-gathering processes and instruments differ largely from one country to another, depending on the educational context and tradition, the actors involved in the design and implementation of the evaluation system, and the main purpose of the evaluation.

The implications arising from the outcomes of the assessments and external evaluations for schools in other jurisdictions are also diverse. For example, a school may be given informal recommendations (e.g., Iceland), lose its recognition or financing (e.g., the Flemish Community of Belgium, the Czech Republic), or be given the label of a 'failing school' that requires special measures. Other consequences might include the possibility of the school being closed or entail financial sanctions (OECD, 2009b: 22).

Even though the concept of self-evaluation is now a mainstream concept in many education systems across Europe and elsewhere, there is evidence that the capacity to engage in peer review, self-reflection and self-evaluation among teachers in Ireland is quite low. According to one stakeholder interviewed for this research, there are a number of reasons why this is the case, such as, the historical underdevelopment of leadership structures in schools and the failure to invest in school leadership structures. The TALIS Report (2009) (OECD, 2009a) also highlights the low levels of engagement with ongoing professional learning among Irish teachers. According to McNamara and O'Hara, if the capacity among teachers to engage in peer review and self-evaluation is not improved it could result in the imposition of narrow and reductionist evaluation and appraisal methodologies on schools and teachers in the future (McNamara & O'Hara, 2008).

Chapter 5
Examples of Assessment
Arrangements in the
School System

Assessment plays a critical role in how pupils learn and in enabling teachers to modify their teaching around the needs of individual pupils. It is also important in helping teachers to identify children who have learning difficulties and to put in place appropriate additional learning support and resources. This chapter provides a summary of assessment of learning³⁶ and assessment for learning³⁷ activities; national and international assessment approaches in the school system; and two national programmes containing a strong emphasis on assessment and evaluation, operating in the Irish school system.

5.1 Assessment of Learning – State Examinations

There are no formal State examinations for children at the end of their primary education. State examinations, however, become a dominant feature in the lives of students once they enter post-primary education. Students at post-primary level can sit two State examinations – the Junior Certificate and the Leaving Certificate.

These State examinations are especially influential in guiding the work of teachers, and indeed students, as they become increasingly concerned with their potential to achieve sufficient points that will enable them avail of their preferred post-school options and ultimately achieve their choice of career. These State examinations shape the work of teachers and provide a sense of the standards that their students have to reach in order to be prepared to sit their examinations. State examinations, therefore, provide another benchmark for the assessment and achievement of standards in the Irish education system, even though many would argue that the system is not perfect. The Leaving Certificate examination, for example, was designed as an end-of-school examination leading to an award of a qualification. Now it has a second purpose assigned to it, i.e., the achievement of points for access to third-level education, which has come to overwhelm the original purpose.

According to one of the stakeholders interviewed for this report:

³⁶ Assessment of learning is traditionally associated with examinations that are designed to measure what the learner has learnt (NCCA, Assessment for Learning information leaflet, http://www.ncca.ie/en/Publications/?loc=/en/Publications/Other_Publications/&query=Assessment%20for%20Learning%20Information%20Leaflet).

³⁷ Assessment for learning is more often associated with the classroom and its purpose is to use the whole process of assessment to help learners to improve their learning (*ibid.*).

this situation and its negative impact on teaching and learning went unchecked within the system for too long' and 'schools where a lot of students got high points were applauded with little attention to others.' They also commented that 'the Leaving Certificate examination results are best understood as an indicator but not necessarily the definition of a good education.

A recent discussion paper on entry to higher education by Professor Áine Hyland highlights some of the critical issues which are undermining the effectiveness of the Senior Cycle in post-primary education and the Leaving Certificate examination, for further education and training, for employment and for the role of students as citizens in society (Hyland, 2011). The paper describes a system that is no longer 'fit for purpose' and one that has been negatively impacted by pressures to achieve maximum points in order to gain access to third-level courses, very often without consideration of the student's aptitude for, or interest in, the subject. Hyland's paper cites Professor Tom Collins³⁸ addressing guidance counsellors in August 2010, who said that:

... there is growing anecdotal evidence that the system is no longer fit for purpose at third level either. There is a palpable concern in higher education regarding the capabilities and dispositions of students entering it straight from second level. The manner in which the points rewards learning and memorisation while simultaneously discouraging exploration, self-directed learning and critical thinking means that even relatively high achieving second-level students can struggle on entering third-level (Hyland, 2011: 7-8).

In response to these, and other earlier criticisms, there has been a shift during the last few years in how the primary and post-primary curriculum is being specified by the NCCA. Individual post-primary subjects, for example, have already been revised or new programmes designed, which now contain a greater emphasis on learning outcomes rather than inputs. The primary curriculum is also being revised along the same lines. In all cases, there will be a clear articulation of what the expectations are for learners, and a clear articulation of the standard against which the quality of teaching and learning in a school can be measured in specific curriculum and subject areas.

At second level, for example, a new revised maths syllabus has been introduced for Junior and Leaving Certificate levels. The programme is being implemented in the context of concerns about the high failure rates in maths in both the Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate examinations and the average rating against international benchmarks of the problem-solving skills of Irish teenagers. The programme, which is called Project Maths, involves changes to what students learn in mathematics, how they learn it and how they will be measured. It aims to

³⁸ Then interim President of the National University of Ireland, Maynooth, now President of the Royal College of Surgeons In Ireland, Medical University Bahrain, and previous chairman of the NCCA.

provide an enhanced student learning experience and greater levels of mathematical achievement. Greater emphasis is placed on students' understanding of mathematical concepts. The NCCA is leading the initiative, that began in 2008 in a pilot group of 24 schools. These schools have contributed to the process of curriculum development with the NCCA. The first two strands, which were piloted in 2008 and worked on by the schools involved in the pilot phase, were introduced nationally for the incoming First Year and Fifth Year students in September 2010. Failure rates almost halved among ordinary-level students who sat the new *Project Maths* in Paper 2 of the exam in 2010. This is being seen as a promising start (Donnelly, 2010).

In addition to the roll-out of the *Project Maths* initiative, which will eventually replace the existing Junior and Leaving Certificate maths syllabi, the DES announced in September 2011 a programme to address the crisis in maths at post-primary level, reflected in the recent controversy about the large number of maths teachers taking Leaving Certificate maths classes who are not fully qualified. This new training programme aims to provide unqualified maths teachers, or those without full qualifications, with the opportunity to up-skill their knowledge of maths, as the *Project Maths* course referred to earlier will be introduced in every school from 2014 (Flynn, 2011). Specific concerns have been raised regarding a lack of clarity in relation to the Teaching Council's role in approving post-graduate qualifications of teachers. It is important that a clear pathway is available by which existing teachers and or other graduates entering the teaching profession can qualify to teach mathematics. The Teaching Council has an important role to play in this regard.

There has been some resistance to the proposed new training programme among teachers. It has been suggested by one of the stakeholders interviewed for this report that:

this is due to the shift in emphasis from teaching inputs to learning outcomes, which will require the use of a range of new teaching methodologies.

Emerging technologies are also influencing teaching methodologies and provide teachers and pupils with additional tools to support the teaching and learning process and experience. These developments have implications for the design and quality of CPD for primary and post primary teachers.

In November 2011, the Minister for Education and Skills announced plans to reform the Junior Certificate programme and replace it with what the Minister described as a 'radical new programme'. The new programme will be introduced in schools from 2014. According to the NCCA:

the proposals will address the problems with rote learning and curriculum overload while providing for greater creativity and innovation. They are designed to strengthen key skills and provide for more relevant and flexible forms of assessment (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2011a).

Final examinations will no longer be the main focus. Instead, forty per cent of all subject marks will be awarded for a portfolio of school work on the basis of school-based assessment over two years. The proposals also recommend a limit on the number of subjects to be taken for qualification purposes, and a reduction in the content of syllabi to make space for active learning and the embedding of key skills (*ibid.*). This reform of teaching methods and curriculum content could have a profound impact on education outcomes including the development of critical thinking and a move away from the dominance of rote learning.

Teachers will still be involved in generating, gathering, judging and reporting on evidence of learning as they have done in the past. However, the introduction of the new Junior Cycle programme envisages a closer relationship between assessment and learning and a reduced focus on assessment in terminal examinations (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2011a). This new emphasis on learning outcomes is designed to provide a more direct and discernible link between the quality of the teaching and learning outcomes for the students at post-primary level. In essence, teachers will be more directly accountable for the learning outcomes of their students.

In successful education systems, teachers are not seen as technicians who strictly implement dictated syllabi but rather as professionals who have the space for innovation to improve learning for all. However, this trend also presents significant challenges for teacher professional development. The success of the ongoing current and future curriculum reform process will depend on the flexibility of teachers and the allocation of adequate resources for their professional development.

The NCCA plans to include proposals for teacher professional development and support to facilitate the successful introduction of the new Junior Cycle. Educational assessment, and the process of engaging with evidence of learning, will be the main focus of this professional development of teachers (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2011b: 27). The role of the Teaching Council in relation to the accreditation of relevant CPD programmes will also be relevant here on commencement of Section 39 of the Teaching Council Act 2001.

5.2 Assessments for Learning

School-based Assessments

School-based assessments of English and maths are influential in guiding the work of schools and teachers since they provide information and benchmarks against which schools can measure how well or otherwise their students are progressing in

relation to the desired learning outcomes specified in the primary curriculum guidelines, and in relation to national and international norms.

Since 2006, primary schools are required to administer standardised literacy and numeracy tests among pupils on two occasions during their primary school cycle.³⁹ These are commercial tests, which are supplied by the Educational Research Centre (ERC), Dublin⁴⁰ and Mary Immaculate College, Limerick.⁴¹ Schools are responsible for administering these tests and calculating the results using the materials provided by the relevant test provider. The ERC provides an automated scoring service for schools who wish to avail of it.

The Education Act 1998 requires schools to regularly evaluate students and periodically report the results of the evaluation to the students and their parents (see DES Circular 138/06). The NCCA has worked with schools to develop templates for reporting to parents, which are available to schools on the NCCA website.⁴² A DES Circular (56/2011) requires all primary schools to use the report card templates for reporting to parents on their child's progress and achievement at school. However, prior to the launch of the new National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy in 2011 (see Section 5.4) schools were not required to inform the DES about the outcomes of the assessment tests, how they used the data, and whether or not the information was provided to parents, even though parents are entitled to this information under the Education Act 1998. There was no systematic way of knowing the degree to which the outcomes of school assessments were shared and/or discussed with parents and among teachers in schools. According to the DES, however, it is not uncommon for an inspector to request to see the assessment data during an inspection visit to a school. However, a substantial proportion of the assessment information remains largely confidential within each school and, therefore, it is unlikely that its potential to contribute to policy development and implementation has been fully capitalised to date.

The new National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy, which will be described later in this chapter, was launched in 2011 and requires, for the first time, that schools provide a summary report on the outcomes of assessment tests to the DES. The Strategy requires primary schools to test at 4th grade, in addition to the 2nd and 6th grades which were previously required. It will also require assessment of Second Year students in post-primary schools. At the time of writing, it is not known what arrangements are in place to manage the receipt and analysis of this data. This will be a difficult task since there are at least two different sets of commercial tests

³⁹ According to Eivers *et al.*, (2010) however, it is not uncommon for most schools to administer assessment tests annually from First through to Sixth Class.

⁴⁰ The ERC supplies the Drumcondra Primary Reading (DPR) and the Drumcondra Primary Maths (DPMT) tests, which are colloquially called the 'Drumcondras'.

⁴¹ Mary Immaculate College supplies the Micra T (reading) and Sigma T (maths) assessment tests.

⁴² There are nine report card templates. All nine templates use the following four key areas for sharing information with parents on their children's progress and achievement at school: insights gained into the child's learning disposition/s; the child's social and personal development; the child's learning across the curriculum; the key role of parents in supporting their child's learning (<http://www.ncca.ie>).

being used in schools. In addition, the scores in one test do not necessarily equate to the same score in another test, which will make it difficult to compare and contrast the results. The DES Inspectorate is aware of this challenge, which will be taken into account in the design of arrangements and processes for the receipt and interpretation of the assessment data that will be received from schools.

National Assessments

In addition to school-based assessments, the DES uses periodic national assessments of reading and maths. These national assessments are implemented by the ERC on behalf of the DES. National assessments have many purposes. As well as providing information on the average level of reading and maths skills in the country, and to compare results from previous assessments, they also provide information on the performance of high and low-achieving pupils and other subgroups of pupils (such as early school leavers, and Travellers,) on specific areas of strengths and weaknesses (e.g. problem-solving in maths), and on trends in performance over time.⁴³ They also provide contextual background information and are used to inform policy.

The results of the national assessments are reported at an aggregated level, and information on the performance of individual schools and individual pupils is reported to schools only. In more recent times, schools are also being provided with feedback on their performance relative to their socio-economic intake.

Over the years, the national assessment tests have been administered with varying frequency, but they have now settled into a four/five-year frequency pattern.

International Assessments

Ireland also participates in international assessments and the ERC manages Ireland's involvement on behalf of the DES. The most familiar of these is the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment commonly known as PISA. PISA is an international assessment of the knowledge and skills of fifteen-year-old post-primary students in reading, mathematics and science. The first PISA took place in 2000 and has continued in three-yearly cycles since then. PISA is the largest international survey of education and is based on a 'knowledge economy' model. This facilitates the results being used by policy makers to inform both educational policy and economic policy decisions.⁴⁴

Ireland has also participated in two similar comparative studies of achievement, i.e. Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), which assesses pupils' reading literacy, and Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) assesses pupils' mathematics and science skills. Both are conducted at

⁴³ The sample size varies. Normally around 150 schools are selected, and between 140–150 school participate.

⁴⁴ See (Finn (2012); Perkins *et al.* (2010); Perkins *et al.* (2011); Perkins *et al.* (2012) for a detailed exploration and interpretation of Ireland's performance in PISA in the past decade.

primary level on Fourth Class pupils, while TIMSS also involves students at second level. They are carried out every five and four years respectively by a group of agencies led by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA). IEA is an independent, international co-operative of national research institutions and governmental research agencies.

Ireland took part in the inaugural TIMSS in 1995, but did not participate again in major international comparative studies of achievement at primary level until 2011, when Ireland also participated in the PIRLS. This was the first time that both tests took place in the same year, providing those countries who participated in both tests an opportunity to compare country performance on one study against performance on the other. Comparative data of this nature, coupled with the data that will be available to the DES as part of the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy are critical to the improvement of standards and quality in the school system. The absence of this kind of information has made it difficult for policy makers and schools to know how well they are doing, and where there are opportunities to make improvements.

The results of national and international assessments are used by the DES to inform policy. For example, the recently launched DES strategy, which is designed to improve literacy and numeracy standards will provide useful indicators of the standard of literacy and numeracy in schools (see Section 5.4 below). However, there is a view among some stakeholders who were interviewed as part of the research for this report that there needs to be more regular assessment of all students, so that schools can be more responsive to their needs. This view is supported in the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy, which states that:

this process of gathering and using assessment data should begin at the level of the individual student to enable the teacher to adjust instruction to suit the needs of individual learners and to inform them and their parents about the progress that they are making (Department of Education and Skills, 2011e: 73).

It has also been said that teachers need to engage more with the implications of all these assessments for them and the pupils in their schools. This view was supported in the OECD PISA 2009 study, which identified Ireland among the countries who do not regularly utilise student achievement data for decision-making or benchmarking and information purposes. According to some education stakeholders interviewed for this report, the Irish school sector is very good at collecting data but not so good at utilising the data that are available in the system. It is also recognised by stakeholders that teachers need to be supported to develop the technical expertise to administer and interpret the outcomes of assessment tests, and to make decisions about the learning needs of individual pupils in their care.

There are examples within the Irish school system of initiatives that are designed around the need to systematically plan, gather data and use the data to inform decisions in relation to policy and service provision. The following sections provide examples of two of these initiatives.

5.3 Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools

In 2005, the DES rolled out a programme entitled Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS). This programme involved an action plan designed to provide a more coherent and targeted approach to addressing educational disadvantage and improving social inclusion in schools that are designated as disadvantaged by the DES (see Box 5.1).

A distinguishing characteristic of this programme is the requirement placed on participating schools to gather, collate and analyse data on the outcomes being achieved in relation to each of the DEIS areas. As part of this process participating schools are required to prepare and implement a DEIS plan, using the data collected through these processes, as a guide in setting targets for improved outcomes, in selecting measures to work towards the targets, and in monitoring progress towards the achievement of the targets.⁴⁵

Box 5.1 A Summary of the DEIS Programme

DEIS is a five-year action plan that targets 673 urban and rural primary schools and 203 second level schools which are identified by the DES as being in need of extra resources to address disadvantage.

The aim of DEIS is ‘to ensure that the educational needs of children and young people from disadvantaged communities are prioritised and effectively addressed’ (Department of Education and Science, 2005a: 9). Unlike many previous programmes, the DEIS action plans includes, targets and strategies designed to improve standards in literacy, school attendance and parental involvement. A key element of DEIS is its focus on actions for schools and its emphasis on evaluation. It also has many of the agreed elements for the successful implementation of policies including targets, delivery mechanisms, and assessment and evaluation frameworks (NESF, 2009).

DEIS provision for urban/town primary schools

For schools serving communities with the highest concentrations of disadvantage:

- Access to early education for children, aged from three up to school enrolment, who will subsequently attend these primary schools;
- Reduced class sizes.

For all urban/town primary schools participating in the programme:

- Allocation of administrative principals on lower enrolment and staffing figures than apply in primary schools generally;
- Additional non-pay capitation allocation based on level of disadvantage*;
- Financial allocation under schoolbooks grant scheme based on level of disadvantage and additional funding targeted primarily at supporting the establishment, development and ongoing operation of book loan/rental schemes,*
- Access to the School Meals Programme, with co-ordination provided at cluster level,*

⁴⁵ School Development Planning Initiative (SDPI) website www.sdpi.ie 6/10/11.

- Access to a literacy/numeracy support service and to literacy/numeracy programmes, for example, Reading Recovery, First Steps, Maths Recovery, *Ready, Steady, Go Maths* and homework clubs/summer camps assisting literacy and numeracy development;
- Access to Home/School/Community Liaison services (including literacy and numeracy initiatives involving parents and family members, such as paired reading, paired maths, *Reading for Fun* and *Maths for Fun*);
- Access to transfer programmes supporting progression from primary to second-level,*
- Access to planning supports;
- Access to a range of professional development supports,*
- Eligibility for teachers/principals **to apply for sabbatical leave scheme*** (Department of Education and Science, 2005a: 84).

*These supports are also available to rural primary schools and school clusters/communities. In addition rural primary schools have access to:

- A teacher/co-ordinator, serving a cluster of schools, and whose functions will include the development of home, school and community linkages, supporting implementation of literacy and numeracy measures, planning supports etc.;
- Financial support as an alternative to teacher/co-ordinator support where a school cannot be clustered (Department of Education and Science, 2005a: 85).

DEIS Provision for second-level DEIS schools

For schools serving the highest concentrations of disadvantage:

- Enhanced guidance counselling provision;
- Provision for a school library and librarian support available to a set number of schools with the highest concentrations of disadvantage.

For all second-level schools:

- Access to the Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP) (and literacy/numeracy supports developed by building on existing measures under the JCSP), Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA), and associated staffing and funding supports;
- Additional non-pay/capitation based on level of disadvantage;
- Financial allocation under schoolbooks grant scheme based on level of disadvantage and additional funding targeted primarily at supporting the establishment, development and ongoing operation of book loan/rental schemes;
- Access to the Schools Meals Programme, with co-ordination provided at cluster level;
- Access to Home/School/Community Liaison services (including literacy and numeracy initiatives involving parents and family members, such as paired reading, paired maths, *Reading for Fun* and *Maths for Fun*);
- Access to a range of supports (both academic and non-academic, and including after-school and holiday-time supports) for young people, with the best practices identified through evaluation of the School Completion Programme being incorporated into cluster-level action plans;
- Access to transfer programmes supporting progression from primary to second-level;
- Access to planning supports;
- Access to a range of professional development supports;
- Eligibility for teachers/principals to apply for sabbatical leave scheme (DES 2005:86).

The DES, through the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST), formerly the School Development Planning Initiative (SDPI), has also designed two sets of materials to support the process of DEIS planning and review at primary and post-primary level. These materials include, for example:

- Review instruments to assist schools in collating and analysing data on their current situation in each of the key areas, and which can guide the selection of targets and improvement measures;
- DEIS Plan Framework – comprising action plan templates to assist schools in recording the targets they set for improvements in each area, the actions or measures they propose to implement to achieve the targets, and the arrangements they intend to follow for monitoring and evaluation.

According to the DES, these materials, which are designed to support schools in making a difference to the educational experiences of all students and raising standards, complement the school self-evaluation and review framework contained in *Looking at our School*, which was described in Chapter 4, and strongly encourages quality assurance in schools. Of more recent significance is the role of PDST staff going out to schools to provide hands-on support in the development of their plans.

Evaluation of targeted programmes provides policy makers with the information necessary to assess the effectiveness, impact, sustainability and future viability of programmes and informs decisions about any adjustments that might be required to make them more effective in the future. Following a request by the DES, an independent evaluation of the School Support Programme (SSP) under DEIS in primary and post-primary schools was initiated in 2007 by the Educational Research Centre (ERC). The purpose of the evaluation was to monitor and assess the implementation of the programme over the period from 2006–7 to 2009–10. The evaluation process was designed to inform policy on the role that DEIS and other similar initiatives can play in promoting social inclusion, and also to identify models of good practice.⁴⁶

The evaluation involved the collection of data from pupils, teachers and parents. Considerable effort was invested in collecting test data from pupils. In the spring of 2007, baseline reading and maths achievement data, involving 17,000 pupils at primary level, was gathered in a sample of approximately 500 participating urban and rural disadvantaged primary schools. A follow-up round of achievement testing took place in the spring of 2010, when the same tests were repeated in a slightly smaller number of the same schools with many of the same pupils.

At post-primary level, the ERC is monitoring achievement outcomes using centrally available data on retention levels and performance in public examinations. In 2007/2008 all of the post-primary schools who were participating in the evaluation

⁴⁶ Educational Research Centre <http://erc.ie>

were invited to facilitate a questionnaire survey of all First-Year and Third-Year students. The evaluation also included visits to a small number of participating schools to discuss with students some of the issues raised by the questionnaire responses.

The ERC published the first evaluation report in March 2009.⁴⁷ The key findings of the 2009 report, which provides an analysis of English reading and mathematics achievement in rural schools who are participating in the SSP, are that:

- Pupils in rural schools performed significantly better than pupils in the urban SSP sample; and
- The scores of the rural sample were significantly below the national norm for reading but not for mathematics.

The evaluation is ongoing and three further reports were published in 2011. Two of these reports were prepared by the DES Inspectorate and the third by the ERC. These evaluations looked at the quality of the planning processes used by DEIS schools to achieve improvement across a range of areas including attendance, attainment levels in literacy and numeracy, in examinations (post-primary level), and partnership with parents.

Both the Inspectorate and the ERC reports highlight achievement gains in literacy and numeracy levels in DEIS primary schools. For example, the ERC research shows statistically significant improvements in both the mathematics and reading levels of pupils in Second, Third and Sixth Class (ERC, 2011: 2). The Inspectorate's evaluation indicates improvements in the literacy levels of pupils, as measured against the schools' own targets, plans or expectations.

The DES research also shows that:

- Almost all of the primary schools reported significant, measurable improvements in the level of attendance;
- The majority of post-primary schools had effective measures in place to improve attendance; and
- Most schools have a variety of measures in place to encourage parental involvement in the school and in their child's learning.

The reports also identify a wide range of areas for improvement. For example, the DES report on primary schools identifies a weakness in school expertise in the monitoring of pupils' progress in learning, and how information arising from the

⁴⁷ Analysis of English Reading and Mathematics Achievement in Schools in the Rural Dimension of the School Support Programme.

assessment of pupils' learning can be used to set learning targets, and to plan and provide suitable learning activities and experiences (Department of Education and Skills, 2011f: 22). At post-primary level the DES report identifies, *inter alia*, that schools did not engage in a systematic way in setting targets for improvement. Where targets had been set they were often too vague, not based on robust data analysis or not related to relevant groups of students (Department of Education and Skills, 2011f: 33).

These results highlight the benefit of planning, setting out performance improvement objectives and measures, and the importance of providing a system of supports to assist schools in the planning and implementation of programmes. This gives rise to the question as to why it is that schools in the wider system are not required to develop the same kind of processes and level of supports as DEIS schools. This was alluded to in the overall conclusions of the DES primary school evaluation study, which stated: 'It is therefore recommended that the DEIS planning framework be made available to all schools (DEIS and non-DEIS) to assist them in their school development planning and school self-evaluation processes' (Department of Education and Skills, 2011f: 21). Echoing this point, the recently published ORP report stated, 'The approach of building evaluation (in terms of setting targets, indicators and reporting mechanisms) into the design of programmes (as in the DEIS programme) should also be mainstreamed' (Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, 2012: 53). The National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy 2011, outlined below, will require all schools to develop School Improvement Plans from the school year 2013–14.

5.4 National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy 2011

Literacy and numeracy skills are essential to equip young people to participate in learning, to take up satisfying careers and to participate fully in society. While Ireland's levels of literacy and numeracy have always been considered to be strong, there have been some worrying trends identified, for example in the OECD PISA results, that were outlined in Section 1.11.3 of this report. In recognition of the need for improvement, the Minister for Education and Skills launched a new National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy that sets out a 'road map', with concrete targets and reforms, that is designed to ensure that children, from early childhood to the end of second level, master these key skills.

The launch of *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life: the National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy Among Children and Young People 2011–2020* provides an example of an approach to the improvement of standards in education. The Strategy clearly articulates performance-improvement measures and places a requirement on schools to report the outcomes of school-based assessments to the Inspectorate. This is a step-change for schools who previously were not required to share this information with the DES except during a school inspection visit when an inspector might request to see the outcomes of the tests.

The purpose of the Strategy is to ensure that every child leaves school having mastered literacy and numeracy for learning and for life. The aims of the Strategy are very specific, and it contains what have been described by the Minister for Education and Skills as ambitious targets to be achieved by 2020. These include:

- At primary-school level, increasing the number of children performing at Level 3 or above (the highest levels) in the national assessments of reading and mathematics by 5 percentage points;
- Reducing the percentage performing at or below the lowest level (Level 1) by 5 percentage points;
- At post-primary level, increasing the number of fifteen-year-old students performing at Level 4 or above (the highest levels) in the OECD's PISA test of literacy and mathematics by at least 5 percentage points;
- Halving the numbers performing at Level 1 (the lowest level) in the PISA test of literacy and mathematics; and
- Improving early childhood education and public attitudes to reading and mathematics.

The strategy also contains the following set of objectives, and associated detailed actions, which are designed to improve the use of assessment and evaluation to support better learning in literacy and numeracy:

- Improve the ability of teachers and Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) practitioners to use assessment approaches and data;
- Improve the use of assessment information to support better teaching and learning in literacy and numeracy for individual students;
- Ensure that all schools use assessment data to inform their three-year school improvement plans;
- Improve the availability of national assessment data on literacy and numeracy achievement;
- Benchmark the literacy and numeracy achievement of students in Irish schools with that of students in other developed countries; and
- Use self-evaluation and external inspection to support improvement in literacy and numeracy achievement (Department of Education and Skills, 2011e).

The Strategy will also require schools to make greater use of the existing standardised tests of reading and mathematics, in Second and Sixth Class in primary schools, and introduce the use of standardised tests for second year students in

post-primary schools. The Strategy contains an expectation that teachers are responsible for knowing and monitoring the literacy and numeracy standards of each of the pupils in their classroom. In keeping with previous practice in primary schools, the Strategy will require all schools to report the findings of the tests to parents and school Boards of Management. Schools will also be required to submit the findings to the DES, which was not the case prior to the implementation of the Strategy. Schools will also be required to develop and implement literacy and numeracy improvement plans with guidance from the Inspectorate. The potential benefits of these arrangements will be lost, however, if the DES does not follow through on its commitment, contained in the Strategy, to establish a national standards infrastructure that would support the improvement of objectives (Department of Education and Skills, 2011e: 83).

Reflecting the collaborative approach utilised by the DES on strategic issues, the publication of the Strategy follows an extensive consultation process, which was initiated in November 2010. Written submissions were received from almost 500 individuals and organisations and the DES facilitated consultative meetings with over 60 interest groups from the education sector as well as from the community and other sectors.⁴⁸ While supporting the proposals for assessment contained in the draft Strategy, the ERC expressed concern about the system's capacity to sustain a large number of additional assessments, and proposed that there should be a more gradual approach to the introduction of these measures. A more gradual introduction of assessment initiatives would provide more time to study the impact of some measures in a subset of schools before extending them to all class levels and all schools (Educational Research Centre, 2011: 21). In addition, the NCCA, in its submission on the draft Strategy, identified a range of areas that would benefit from further clarification and discussion, for example, the capacity of testing to promote and sustain reform, the role of teachers in the ambition for continuous improvement, and systemic issues relating to the plan's overall strategy. According to representatives of the ERC and the NCCA, these concerns were taken on board by the DES and have been addressed in the 2011 Strategy.

⁴⁸ DES Press Release 08/07/11, DES website: <http://www.education.ie>

Chapter 6

Conclusion

6.1 Introduction

This chapter suggests that the Irish school system may be at a pivotal moment. The wide range of institutional developments and changes to practice initiated over the last fifteen years, reviewed in this report, could be understood in a number of different ways. One could take the view that many important changes to the school system have been completed and that this will now result in greater oversight, accountability and improvement. Alternatively, it could be argued that important as these changes are, further work needs to be done to ensure that these novel developments bear fruit in terms of better schooling and educational outcomes. This chapter argues that there are two additional tasks that need to be advanced so that the potential of the new institutional regime of monitoring, standards and accountability is realised. These are: (i) inculcate disciplines of review and evaluation within the practice of individual teachers and schools; and (ii) establish a national data and standards framework that will allow teachers to benchmark their progress and chart paths of improvement for students. What each of these issues entails is examined in this chapter. Their significance and potential is then assessed in light of the proposals about responsive regulation articulated in NESC's earlier overview report on quality standards in human services, (NESC, 2011).

6.2 Viewing the Irish School System through the Lens of Quality and Regulatory Models

The NESC project on quality, standards and accountability has sought to assess human services in Ireland using the concepts and models of regulation and continuous improvement that are studied internationally. As set out in our first, conceptual, report, this draws attention to a number of themes: responsive regulation, a focus on, and involvement of, service users, devolution with accountability; optimising resources; and monitoring and learning (NESC, 2011). Before outlining our main conclusions and proposals concerning Irish schools, we briefly summarise how the Irish system of quality and accountability in education looks on these dimensions.

6.2.1 Responsive, Smart and Meta-Regulation

The idea of responsive regulation is to avoid the problems of both the command and control approach and pure self-regulation by modulating engagement and sanctions of the central authority, depending on the performance and capability of the frontline provider. It also involves an attempt to link a ‘regulatory pyramid’ with a ‘strengths-based pyramid’, see chapter one. The developments of the past decade or more certainly move the Irish system in the direction of responsive regulation. But, as we demonstrate throughout our analysis and elaborate in the rest of this chapter, the system does not yet contain some of the key characteristics of responsive regulation.

The idea of smart regulation was developed to capture the fact that, in many contexts, regulatory authorities recognise their own limits and engage a range of actors, often including the regulated entity, to perform and achieve regulatory goals. At first sight, the current Irish education system might seem like an example of smart regulation, given the multiplicity of actors and agencies involved in activities that shape the degree of quality and accountability, including the Department, the Inspectorate, the NCCA, the Teaching Council, the Boards of Management, State Examinations Commission, trade unions, parents’ associations and student councils. However, it is not involvement or multiplicity that makes for smart regulation, but a division of labour that achieves the goals of quality, accountability and continuous improvement. Here, the Irish system, though it has developed considerably, if much too slowly, does not yet constitute a convincing system.

Meta-regulation is the term used to describe the regulation of self-regulation. Again, starting from a very low base, Ireland has been moving in the right direction in the past decade or so. This is evident in the increasing emphasis of the Inspectorate on the need for schools to identify performance objectives, undertake regular self-evaluation, involve parents and pupils in the monitoring processes, and the requests by visiting inspectors to see evidence of these practices, as well as the recent design of materials to support these activities. However, for reasons we have identified earlier and discuss further below, Irish schools do not yet have a thorough and convincing system of self-regulation. Even though there has been an expectation, since the introduction more than ten years ago of the LAOS and WSE, that schools would undertake self-evaluation, there is little evidence that this practice is prevalent and effective in the majority of schools. This leads one to ask about the new enhanced role of BOMs and their potential to fulfil this requirement. Critical to the success of the meta-regulation approach is the development of appropriate performance measures, usually as part of an agreed plan, outlining the key objectives to be addressed (NESC, 2011: 23). Indeed, some might view the creation of the Teaching Council as bringing the teaching profession to where the medical and legal professions were some decades ago – a position which, across most of the world, has long been seen as offering insufficient assurance and has been largely superceded by more fine-grained systems of monitoring, accountability and continuous improvement. Furthermore, we argue below that in the Irish education system the centre is not yet in a position to assess, support and insist on self-regulation at school level.

6.2.2 A Focus on, and Involvement of, Service Users

As we outline in our conceptual overview, the involvement of service users is an important factor in the development and application of standards for the provision of quality human services (NESC, 2011). The Irish school system has long been characterised by a very high level of engagement of stakeholders. This has significant advantages. At first sight, it might suggest that the Irish system displays the form of involvement described in research on the successful systems of human service provision reported in our earlier report. However, in that report we make clear that it is a focus on service users, rather than stakeholder engagement *per se*, that characterises the new models of service provision. This reflects the core fact that has motivated the development of these approaches: people's needs, and the contexts in which they seek to flourish, vary much more than was acknowledged in traditional systems of uniform, population-wide service provision. It is the variety of individual needs and contexts that warrants the key feature of the emerging world of services—the provision of 'tailored' or 'person-centred' services. The rest of the new systems of quality, accountability and continuous improvement flow from this: what information, practices and adjustments are necessary to tailor a service to the needs of a pupil? Implicit in finding an answer to this question – and however complex the resulting institutional system – is a form of *direct* engagement with a student. By contrast, the quite remarkable level of engagement traditionally evident in the Irish school system is, to a very large degree, *representative*. This has its uses, but it should not be assumed to entail the kind of engagement that we are exploring in this study of quality, accountability and continuous improvement.

6.2.3 Devolution with Accountability

The Irish school system was traditionally characterised by a high degree of devolution with almost no accountability, combined with elements of tight central control. The developments described in this report have changed this quite considerably. In some respects, the degree of devolution has been attenuated, and the DES has insisted on WSE, greater inspection and more standardised testing. In other respects, devolution has been enhanced, as functions previously held by the DES are handed to other bodies and actors including BOMs. In very broad terms, these are the kinds of directions of change that we would expect if the system was moving in the direction of the new approaches to human services. However, achieving the full potential of these changes depends, in the end, on the quality of accountability and the functions and capabilities of both the schools and the policy centre. In the remainder of this chapter, we argue that, in these respects, the Irish system remains incomplete. In addition, there has to remain some doubts about whether some of the entities to which responsibility has been devolved – most notably the Boards of Management – could ever be capable of undertaking the roles they have been assigned; indeed, this doubt increases once we recognise that the school-level involvement in self-evaluation and peer review needs to develop further if we are to reap the potential rewards of the innovations of the past decade.

6.2.4 Monitoring and Learning

Our review of international practice and thinking underlined the central role of monitoring and learning in a regime of quality, accountability and continuous improvement. The developments described in this report demonstrate that a focus on ‘outcomes’ is becoming a more integral feature of the work of the various actors in Irish schools. Indeed, the DES Inspectorate and other specialist agencies – including the Teaching Council, NCCA and the NEWB – provide evidence of a commitment to review and continuous improvement since all have initiated external independent reviews of their organisations and their effectiveness, and regularly benchmark themselves against their counterparts in Europe and further afield. The Inspectorate, in particular, has initiated more than one external review and is also putting in place arrangements for more regular feedback from other sections of the DES and schools who have been the subject of an inspection process.

However, as we discuss further below, what is less clear and less convincing is the ability of the system of monitoring to diagnose and address problems in the core activity – teaching and learning. It remains unclear that the results of monitoring and assessment are acted upon, the extent to which the information gathered is analysed and shared, and how it might be used by other service providers to improve their services or bring about more systemic changes (NESC, 2011: 79-80). Although for the last four years the DES School Improvement Group has dealt with 60 poorly performing schools and resolved difficulties in over half of them – issues about the quality of teaching still persists in other schools. As mentioned previously in this report, the evidence suggests that the practice of self-evaluation and review is limited within the school system. In this chapter, we suggest that this is, in turn, related to lack of an adequate national system of data collection and provision.

Overall, when we view developments in Irish education through the lens of quality and regulatory models and thinking, we find an encouraging, but circuitous, pattern. A range of significant steps have been taken that move the system towards a greater focus on evaluation, standards and accountability. But these initiatives and institutional changes have, in some respects, circled around the core arena of teaching and learning. The central argument of this study is that these valuable methods and processes now need to be carried right into the critical zone of teaching practice, assessment, individual learning experience, and peer review across teachers and schools, all supported by a more developed national data and standards framework.

6.3 Consolidation or Transformation?

As underlined in this report, there have been considerable institutional developments with respect to the school system over the last fifteen years or so. External oversight, through the system of Whole School Evaluations (WSE) and unannounced inspections, has been introduced to primary and post-primary schools in the last decade in response to concerns about the accountability of the school system (Mathews, 2010). Accountability concerns have also motivated changes in

the function of Boards of Management, which now have a role in relation to the performance of individual teachers as they can now suspend or dismiss under-performing teachers. A Teaching Council has been established and is now empowered to assess the qualifications of teachers through its powers of accreditation for teacher-training programmes and its capacity to review the knowledge and skills required for teaching. Publication of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) scores in 2009 has fuelled concerns that the fundamental educational capacities of Irish students may be declining (for a balanced overview of this area, see the NESC Secretariat Paper, (Finn, 2012). Partly in response, the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy has been formulated to address concerns that these fundamental skills are declining. Thanks to this Strategy, the Department of Education and Skills is committed to an ambitious programme of helping schools to benchmark themselves against their equivalents and set targets for improvements. Reform of the curriculum has also been high on the political agenda as anxieties have been expressed about how well schooling prepares students for self-directed learning and critical thinking.

At one level, this is an impressive stock of developments and could signal real change in the system of schooling. A reasonable assumption might be that the priority now should be to ensure that these changes are bedded down so that they might have a real effect on teaching practice. Precedence should be given to issues like assuring that schools take on board the advice to undertake self-evaluation, that Boards of Management are properly appraised of their new role, that the Teaching Council manages its Register of Teachers to guarantee their competence, and that the Department of Education and Skills implements the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy.

Pressing forward on these issues could, of course, be delayed by some distinctive features of the Irish education system. The assessment of the Department of Educational and Skills conducted by the Organisational Review Programme (ORP) testified to the 'inordinate length of time' (Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, 2012: 28) it has taken for the development and implementation of education policies. Instances include the lag between the piloting of Whole-School Evaluation in 1998 and its general introduction in 2004; and the delay in the establishment of the Teaching Council between its being proposed in a White Paper in 1995 and its realisation in 2006. Explanations for this sluggish pace include the difficulties of 'implementing policy through so many autonomous bodies' (*ibid.*), some of whom may hold entrenched perceptions about their interests. It is not difficult to envisage that the pace of implementation of the initiatives and systems described in this report could be restrained due to this factor, as well as to the problem of trying to induce change at a time of reduced resources.

6.4 Two Fundamental Issues For Quality Schooling

An analysis of the developments of the past decade that is informed by international thinking on quality and accountability suggests that there still remains some way to go in building a system of quality and continuous improvement within

teaching and schooling. This is because, notwithstanding the many developments described in this report, there are some critical pieces missing, of which two are especially important: (i) the general absence of a culture and discipline of reflective practice within schools based upon relatively objective evidence rather than subjective impressions; and (ii) the absence of a provision of a national data and standards framework that provides a secure basis for judgement about quality and improvement. The first is absolutely dependent on the second whilst the second is redundant without the first. According to a DES representative both have developed though not all of the relevant information is publicly available. The Inspectorate has developed a number of documents that indicate standards to be achieved at particular points along the quality continuum. Processes of internal review within classrooms and schools need some external standards of quality and performance as a yardstick for benchmarking. And external standards of excellence are of limited use if they are not used to impel deeper, diagnostic enquiry into why certain problems of teaching and learning are manifesting themselves and how they might be ameliorated.

Reflecting this overall deficit of objective evaluation, McNamara and O'Hara (2012: 7) consider that in primary schools there are no generally 'accepted benchmarks against which to compare student achievement and teacher performance', although this will change in 2012 thanks to the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2012). Mathews considers that there is a 'void in Irish post-primary schools with regard to measuring standards of achievement and progress' (2010: 152). The OECD TALIS survey of 2007–08 seems to confirm such a view as its results show that 56 per cent of teachers of lower secondary education – a classification that runs up to those taking the Junior Certificate – worked in schools that never underwent self-evaluation in the previous five years, with a further 25 per cent doing so just once. External evaluation seems to be similarly infrequent with approximately 57 per cent of this cohort of teachers reporting that their schools had not been inspected in the previous five years (OECD, 2009a: 174). Matters may have changed since the survey. According to DES stakeholders, at present a post-primary school experiences either a WSE or subject inspection approximately every eighteen months on average. Regarding the inspections that do take place, research suggests that there is a difficulty in connecting the observed appraisal of teaching practice to external benchmarks of excellence. (McNamara *et al.*, 2011, McNamara & O'Hara, 2012, Mathews, 2010). Even if teachers do attempt to engage in evaluation of their practice, the lack of credible external benchmarks of progress and excellence makes it difficult for teachers to assess how well they and their students are doing.

Our central argument is that these two further steps, first, ensuring that assessment of practice is embedded within 'every teacher's professional business' (Department of Education and Skills, 2010b: 17) and, second, relating this to a national system of data and standards, should not be viewed as a supplemental extra to all the positive institutional developments outlined in this report. Rather, they are essential if the potential of all of the new practices and bodies is to be realised. For example, in the absence of evaluation-driven practice within schools and credible external benchmarking, the processes of inspection and evaluation might be dominated by compliance concerns rather than improvement, reflecting the fact that many

teachers believe that evaluation is something done to them rather than undertaken by them. If there is a paucity of nationally valid standards, the Inspectorate may find it difficult to make a judgement about the adequacy of schools. Boards of Management could find it difficult to fulfil their new functions if they do not have some objective basis to assess the adequacy of teaching; they might revert to, or remain within, their largely administrative role (in any event they may find it difficult to adapt to their new functions given their lack of expertise in areas like employment law (Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, 2012: 51). Innovations in the school curriculum could be diluted if not accompanied by reviews of practice within classrooms. Continuous Professional Development (CPD) might be a relatively sterile exercise if it is not connected to the specific difficulties encountered by individual teachers within the classroom and designed to counteract these problems.⁴⁹ And the ambitions of the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy would be stymied if they are not allied to review at individual, school and systemic level. It is also difficult to propose a meaningful approach to CPD without considering a model of teacher career development that encourages and rewards ambition and achievement.

6.5 Gauging Progress with Respect to Standards

It is important to emphasise that the Department of Education and Skills is conscious of these issues. The 2011 National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy states that the use of standardised testing for monitoring students' learning and informing schools' self-evaluation processes has been 'relatively rare in Irish primary schools' and the situation is even 'less satisfactory at post-primary level' (Department of Education and Skills, 2011e: 76). Conversely, it is widely recognised that the success of some of the DEIS schemes has been predicated on building evaluation in terms of setting targets, indicators and reporting mechanisms into the design of the programmes. The Inspectorate has highlighted how target-setting, the implementation of strategies to achieve these targets, monitoring of progress and the review of targets can lead to overall improvements within DEIS schools (Department of Education and Skills, 2011f: 21). Not surprisingly, the ORP has recommended that this approach be mainstreamed to all schools.

It seems clear that the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy does reflect an evaluative effort as it seeks to assess students' progress with respect to literacy and numeracy by reference to transparent outcomes. In the Department's view, the Strategy requires a 'curriculum that combines clear statements of learning outcomes and accessible examples of what learners should know or be able to do in literacy and numeracy' (Department of Education and Skills, 2011e: 73). The Department considers that such a curriculum would 'provide a reliable framework of reference against which teachers, parents and students can benchmark

achievement and progress' (*ibid.*: 74). It suggests that the information arising from standardised testing will be used at three levels:

- The individual level – whereby teachers can adjust instruction to suit the needs of individual learners and to inform them and their parents about the progress that they are making;
- The school level – so that principals and Boards of Management can see how they can adjust learning strategies within schools (see also (Department of Education and Skills, 2011e: 78-80);
- The system level – to inform national educational policy for literacy and numeracy and identify ways of improving the performance of the school system.

Implementing standardised testing throughout the country would not only have important implications for pupils and teachers but also for schools, Boards of Management and the educational system. Schools would be affected by being required to incorporate the data arising from testing into their evaluation of their own practice, which may go some way to filling the information deficit that has been identified in the Whole School Evaluation process. Principals would be required to report to Boards of Management on the results of standardised tests and the boards will have to be trained in the interpretation of such data. Some scepticism exists about their willingness and capacity to undertake 'onerous' tasks like this (Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, 2012: 51). And the Department of Education and Skills has committed itself to analyse the data so as to provide trend data on achievement in different categories of school, and explore how this kind of information could be used to 'assist schools in benchmarking their standards against a norm for similar schools and to set targets for improvement' (Department of Education and Skills, 2011e: 83). This last point is supported by (Smyth, (1999: 226) who argues that information collected at the school level is likely to be of limited utility without comparable information on the national context. In other words, some sort of national data and standards framework needs to be built so that the appropriate benchmarks for performance can be established. Consequently, achieving the full potential of the important initiatives of the past decade involves more than waiting for them to 'bed down' at school level, or in the Teaching Council; it requires the 'centre' to support the use of standardised testing and self-evaluation by building an architecture of national-level information-gathering and presentation.

6.6 The Limitations of Standardised Testing and the Role of Tailored Assessment

While the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy might help to provide a focus to the activities of those bodies responsible for schooling, it should be recognised that large-scale, standards-based assessments have certain limitations. The first of these relates to the need for what the ERC has termed a 'system of moderation' so that

consistency in the rating of students' performance in relation to these standards is achieved. The ERC suggests that this could involve designing assessments and analysing data arising from these tests. Engaging in such an exercise would 'enhance teachers' understanding of learning goals and criteria indicating progress towards them' (Educational Research Centre, 2011: 8). This latter notion of developmental progress points to the second limitation of large-scale tests, namely that they 'do not provide the detailed information needed to diagnose the specific sources of student difficulty' (Looney, 2011: 15). A further problem with national standardised tests is that feedback on this kind of testing is not delivered in sufficient time to prompt improvements in pupils' performance. Looney cites research demonstrating that where feedback was delivered during a class or over the course of a month, the rate of student progress was approximately double that found in control classrooms (*ibid.*: 18).

To understand this argument, it is useful to distinguish between 'summative assessment' and 'formative assessment'. Standardised tests are summative assessments since they measure progress at some fixed point. Formative assessments provide ongoing information that can assist adjustment and improvement – they pose reasons for failure and suggest remedies. To overcome the limits of the system built over the past decade, some means of formative assessment is required. Relaying how a student has done, say at the end of Second-Class, is different from assessing him/her throughout the year to see how him/her are faring and what might need to be improved. It is akin to the difference between a 1,500m runner being told only his final finish time, a summative assessment, and each of his lap times during the race so he or she knows if he or she needs to change pace which equates to formative assessment. Referring to this notion of formative assessment, the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy designates it as Assessment for Learning (AfL), whereby a teacher uses evidence from assessment on an ongoing basis to inform teaching and learning. The Inspectorate has pointed out there is significant scope to develop both summative and formative assessment within Irish schools. Based on an aggregate review of the findings of the incidental inspection process, they have noted that there is a weakness within schools in terms of the monitoring of student learning and how information arising from this kind of review can be used to set learning targets and exercises (Department of Education and Skills, 2010b: 17).

Building on the distinction between formative and summative assessment, the NCCA has also identified the need for some sort of mechanism or forum, which would facilitate the formative use of standardised assessment and link it to changes in teachers' practices and improvements in the learning of students. To bring this about teachers need:

a process by which they can analyse the data, link the information to their own teaching, and test the links using parallel, but different, evidence from others in professional learning teams (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2011b: 37, italics in original).

Formative assessment should be used not only to stimulate positive changes in student performance but also in teachers' practice, which is not the norm in most

OECD countries (Looney, 2011). Effective teacher appraisal systems could indicate good teaching and assessment practices and identify areas for improvement. Looking at the TALIS survey again, this seems to be a weakness within Irish schools. Forty-three per cent of teachers of lower secondary education reported that they had never received feedback from the principal about their work in the school in the previous five years (the average score in this category across 23 countries was 22 per cent). And 52 per cent of such teachers reported that they had never received feedback from other teachers or members of the school management team about their work in the school in the same period (OECD, 2009a: 177–78). Feedback and appraisal leading to enhanced teaching performance has been among the most significant innovations introduced in the approach taken to educational reforms in Victoria, Australia (see Box 6.1).

These innovations are dependent on and help to build a framework of standards. Teachers need data and standards to assess accurately their progress in teaching but standards need to be complemented by formative models of assessment that are able to diagnose problems of student learning. If the introduction of the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy is to be of benefit, further work is needed to progress data generation and standards within schools. This would involve establishing some sort of mechanism that would both ensure consistency of summative assessments and criteria for formative assessment. Taking such a path would allow both the ends or goals – achievement of adequate literacy and numeracy – and the means – quality teaching practices – to be clarified and modified on an ongoing basis. None of the foregoing is guaranteed and is dependent on establishing some mechanism to explore what quality teaching means and how this might best be attained.

6.7 Refashioning the Practice of Teaching

In turn, these institutional changes are dependent on being embraced and animated by a significant cohort of teachers and this would represent a significant cultural shift. Brown (2010) in a survey of every second-level principal in the country reports that just under one-third of principals engage in any form of self-evaluation on a regular basis (cited in (McNamara & O'Hara, 2012: 13). Their view of evaluation is that it is a response to an external intervention, that requires collation of policies and plans. Enquiring into how these policies influenced and were affected by the daily regime of schooling was not seen as a concern for teachers. Expressing such a sentiment, one principal has remarked that;

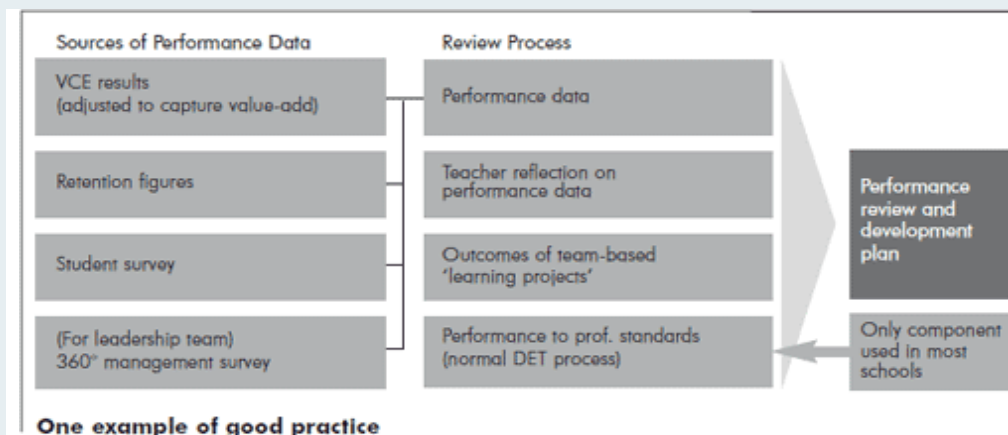
When we get all this stuff together we don't have time to worry about what is happening to it on an ongoing basis. That happens anyway in the everyday life of the school. Policies take on a life but this life does not necessarily have to be recorded and anyway I am not sure if we could record it even if we wanted to. After all we are teachers and not researchers! (*ibid.*).

Box 6.1 Raising Standards in Victoria's Schools

In 2003, the Labour government of Victoria, Australia, identified a need to take action to improve educational outcomes for all students. Problems included high variations in outcomes between classes in particular schools; variations in outcomes between schools with similar student intakes, and a heavy concentration of poor outcomes in some schools. A number of interlocking strategies were identified as pivotal for reform. These included:

1. **Focusing on student learning:** Achieved through (a) improved reporting on student achievement; and (b) development of broad assessment processes against which defined standards of learning at key points were measured.
2. **Building Leadership Capacity:** Victoria's schools fared badly on effective performance management so that constructive feedback was not deployed and support to minimize unsatisfactory performance was lacking.
3. **Establishing a Performance & Development (P&D) Culture:** An accreditation scheme based on self-assessment that stresses the use of multiple sources of feedback on teacher performance (see diagram) and its use in customised teacher-development plans.
4. **Providing Mentoring and Peer Support:** Through the P&D scheme, teachers began to observe and give feedback on their peers' performance.
5. **Encouraging Improvement through External Reviews:** Schools with differing levels of performance were subject to graduated interventions.

One example of the changes introduced is demonstrated by the diagram below, which shows the internal review process introduced into schools and how it differs.



Based on the internal review, regional offices can allocate schools to one of four increasingly intensive external reviews: negotiated; continuous improvement; diagnostic; and extended diagnostic. Reviews vary according to the time external teams spend in the school and the nature of problems within them. In conjunction with this team and the regional network leader, schools identify the requisite key improvement strategies. A further component of reform is the requirement that Victoria's highest-performing schools take on further responsibility by sharing their knowledge and capacity with other schools.

The Victoria schools reform programme has been identified as an example of 'effective large scale reform ... from which others can learn' (OECD, 2008: 204–8) and as an example of a 'world-class service' (UK Government's Cabinet Office's Strategy Unit, 2009). This is not to say that obstacles to reform do not persist. In particular, there is a need to use disaggregated data to focus attention on disadvantaged pupils and isolated schools. And more could be done to involve families and communities.

On the surface, this might seem to be a plausible response. But if we recall the concerns about Ireland's comparative educational performance (Finn, 2012) and examine the reasons behind Finland's success, another perspective emerges. It has been convincingly argued that Finland has consistently scored well in the PISA scores not because it is an especially homogenous country, nor because of its social democratic political heritage and commitment to equity. Other Nordic countries share these general characteristics but have not been able to emulate Finland's educational successes. Rather the quality of Finnish education has been attributed to a number of features of its system of teaching training, early assessment, and classroom practice. Thanks to these aspects, teaching in Finland is distinguished by its constant reliance on low-stakes testing for cognitive difficulties from age two and a half. These tests are not concerned primarily with registering failures in learning but with indicating 'where, at what step in problem solving, a breakdown occurred and thus help to suggest what might be done to overcome it' (Sabel, C. *et al.*, 2011: 12). By the time Finnish children reach the equivalent of primary school at the age of six, teachers are able to 'anticipate learning difficulties on the basis of a rich battery of further tests' (*ibid.*). Finnish teachers can carry out this kind of testing because of reforms to teacher education programmes that have versed teachers in the conduct of research. As a result, teachers in Finland view themselves as a wider community of 'professional educators *and researchers*' (emphasis added) and special needs teachers are seen as a particularly important link between 'pedagogy in the schools and research activities outside them' (*ibid.*: 29). Although the contrast with Ireland is stark, this should not be taken as a lack of interest in practical research on the part of Irish teachers. Irish principals believe that they have neither the capacity nor resources, especially of time, to become 'genuine data-generating, self-evaluating professionals' (McNamara & O'Hara, 2012: 14). It is an important issue for the Department of Education and Skills and the Teaching Council to consider how such a cadre of professionals can be built up through alterations to teacher-training programmes and to the process of inspection.

Conceivably, one could assent to the proposition about the importance of instilling a culture of reflective practice within schools while dissenting from the view that it should be supported by a national data and standards framework, the second of this chapter's two main recommendations. Commentators will sometimes point to the lack of standardised, high-stakes testing within Finnish schools as proof that schools 'know' best and should be allowed to teach without undue, central interference. While it is important to acknowledge the limitations of standardised, summative testing, this does not entail that every school should be autonomous in terms of assessing its own performance. The Finnish system has been described as a 'trade of autonomy in return for rich and continuing reporting on results' (Sabel, C. *et al.*, 2011: 32), a portrayal that could equally apply to educational reforms in Victoria, Australia (see Box 6.1). Finnish schools are governed by a process of 'steering by information', which includes data, not just on important outcomes, but also underlying problems, and the provision of tools to better address learning difficulties. This is not to say that Finland has totally resolved the two main issues of instilling continuous monitoring and providing a national standards infrastructure. Evidence has emerged of significant variations in the provision of special needs education in different municipalities within Finland. As different decision-making criteria for providing special education throughout the country are being used, this

has prompted concerns about the equity of the situation and calls for greater transparency through more peer review.

6.8 Conclusion – Towards a System of Responsive Regulation for Schools

Evidence that even a world-renowned educational performer like Finland still has outstanding issues to address may provide some comfort to a jurisdiction like Ireland which might seem to be lagging behind. And the changed circumstances within Ireland might seem to offer a greater opportunity for dramatic change. This may be true, but it is also the case that the crisis of the public finances means that practitioners may see less scope for embarking on the processes of review and self-evaluation that have been outlined here. Schools may decide to prioritise on the tasks that they view as essential rather than those that are considered optional. One principal has articulated these feelings in this way:

Now that I am down a number of deputy principals I am going to look after the things that I legally need to – in my case the health and safety stuff and the exams. The work put in by middle managers to strengthen subject teams, to start gathering information, to plan and such like is going to fall by the wayside. I can't support things that take teachers out of classes and a lot of this stuff does that. In the end we have to make choices and I will choose our core business every time (cited in (McNamara & O'Hara, 2012: 17).

The Department of Education and Skills has given notice of the importance of stakeholders moving 'beyond the traditional response that seeks to protect and maintain the status quo in terms of structures and resources in particular areas or in simply looking for more resources'. And the Department went on to note that it has a 'role in ensuring the availability of analysis to inform such considerations' (Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, 2012: 203). What this role might be and what kind of analysis might support a transition beyond the status quo has yet to be articulated.

Perhaps one way of clarifying what might be some helpful next steps is to examine the recommendations outlined here through the prism of NESC's earlier overview of research on quality in human services. Schools have considerable autonomy, and coupled with their sheer number – approximately 4,000 – as well as the lack of an intermediate tier between them and the Department present a considerable challenge for governance (Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, 2012: 22). All these factors make it difficult for the Department to act in a hierarchical fashion and make more plausible the ideas of responsive regulation for this sector.

Often it is the case that the regulatory relationship encompasses many different entities, such as community groups, rather than just being confined to two parties, a feature often referred to as 'smart regulation'. Section 6.2 casts some doubt on whether the Irish school system can be characterised in this way since it is not clear

that there is an appropriate division of labour that would facilitate quality and continuous improvement. Yet tendencies in this direction are apparent. For example, one of the innovations of the Whole School Evaluation process in 2010 involved a requirement to survey parent and student opinion in order to gain an insight into their views about the performance of the school. This may well be more effective in stimulating improvements than occasional visits from the Inspectorate, which struggles, due to resource constraints, to make frequent visits to individual schools (Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, 2012: 54). Multiple sources of performance data have been a significant driver of change within the Victorian school system as well (see Box 6.1).

If the involvement of service users is one way of encouraging continuous improvement, stimulating organisations to regulate themselves is another – what is termed ‘meta-regulation’. As we have seen, establishing this model of self-regulation has proven difficult but will have to be overcome if quality and continuous improvement in schooling is to be obtained. The approach used within DEIS secondary schools has been advocated but there perhaps needs to be more reflection on the reasons for its adoption. Has a more outcome-oriented style of teaching been achieved thanks to its link to extra resources? If this is the case, then in a period of reduced resources and cutbacks, this approach is not feasible for the whole school system. In this context then the policy centre of the Department needs to think about other means by which this approach could be encouraged, perhaps through an accreditation scheme like that used in Victoria, Australia (see Box 6.1). The Department will also have to induce greater support for the development of performance measures.

Many teachers may balk at such suggestions and side with Ravitch (2010: 228), who initially supported the testing driven regime of the No Child Left Behind⁵⁰ initiative in the USA, but now considers that the ‘unrelenting focus on data is distorting the nature and quality of education’ and that any accountability system should include a variety of measures and not just test scores. In advocating the widespread adoption of standardised testing within schools, this report has recognised their limitations. National tests have to be complemented by more individualised models of assessment that can guide how teachers might modify their pedagogy to suit particular students. While the use of standardised testing is an important component of accountability, the fact that they should be coupled with individualised assessment and hence teaching means that they can also be a catalyst for improvement.

With responsive regulation, the focus is on the articulation of broad goals – or what one might call standards – which are then exemplified through the work of frontline organisations like schools. NESC’s overview report of quality in human services considered that these standards should themselves be subject to revision and put forward what is called a model of triple-loop learning as practitioners, managers and regulators each review their achievements and adjust their strategies. The

⁵⁰ The No Child Left Behind Act 2001 attempts to accomplish standards-based education reform.

National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy's focus on the three different levels at which standardised testing will be used is comparable to this model as it is used at the level of individual teachers, schools and the overall system.

The overview report also draws attention to the need for the policy 'centre', whatever its composition, to manage the overall institutional environment with a view to maximising the disciplines of review and improvement within the system. In this respect, embracing the two vital steps outlined in this chapter – encouraging review and improvement within schools and providing a national framework of data and standards relating to educational outcomes – may be of assistance in managing and guiding the range of institutions that have sprung up over the last fifteen years. It would require all institutions to ask themselves how they are contributing to these steps. For example, it would require a body like the Teaching Council to probe the adequacy of teachers' initial teacher education, induction into the profession and continuing professional development in a more fundamental way than has been the case to date. It would necessitate the Department asking what is the best system of smart regulation: devoting resources to Boards of Management or more directly to service users by mandating regular surveys of their perceptions of the quality of education. It would entail that the department ask itself how self-regulation by and within schools can be supported. These kinds of questions are indicative of the supportive yet critical role that the Department, as the policy centre, will have to play if quality within classrooms and schools is to be assured.

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