



An Chomhairle Náisiúnta Eacnamaíoch agus Shóisialta
National Economic & Social Council

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

Executive Summary

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.

