REDUCING THE BURDEN

A draft DUP Policy paper on addressing issues of administration, inspection, pressures and leadership currently faced within our schools system

INTRODUCTION

It is disturbing, but unsurprising, that there is a developing consensus of the growing pressures faced within our schools’ system, which impacts on students and staff alike, with much of the burden most acutely felt by those in leadership roles. Some of this is generated by wider social trends, such as pressures on families, increasing expectations and peer pressures on young people, pervasive negative aspects of social media and in many cases breakdown of boundaries of respect.

Much of this is also either internal to the education sector itself, or is exacerbated within schools. The cumulative impact of these pressures are leading to a lowering of staff morale, teachers leaving the profession, a reluctance to seek leadership positions in schools given the additional problems they entail, and in the long run is likely to have a detrimental impact on standards. While these issues are both increased by the problems created by the financial crisis that education in Northern Ireland is currently in, and in turn deepens those specific resource problems, they also go beyond issues of money. While we have also proposed measures to ease the financial situation through our policy paper –Frontline First, this policy paper looks at other qualitative changes within our school system, concentrating on administration, inspection, leadership and governance, although all these are interlinked with finance. There are much wider societal problems, some of which, at best, we have a limited influence over, and others which require a much deeper set of interventions, particularly as they effect young people, but here we mainly focus on educational systems delivery. In short, how do we reduce the burden on our educational professionals, and enable them to do what they do best by concentrating on delivering teaching.
SHIFTING CULTURE WITHIN OUR EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

Fundamental to reducing the burden on schools is a shift in culture and attitude to the approach that we take to educational delivery. While accountability remains important, and above all ensuring child protection and safety essential, which will require stringent and ever more vigilant implementation, the starting premise for educational delivery should be trust in schools. As one local educationalist has put it “bluntly as this juncture we can take the “High Road” over the “Low Road”. The Low Road is characterised by systems of micro-accountability, excessive testing, bureaucratic assessment and data driven evaluation, with teaching debased as a low discretion craft. The High Road encourages reflective high skill, autonomous professionalism with practitioners recognised for their knowledge, expertise and judgement.” While the practical realities may not be as stark as choosing between polar opposites, a shift further towards a High Road / High Trust approach has implications around considerations such as administration, inspection, professional development and leadership/governance, as well as embracing a philosophical mind set change.

ADMINISTRATION

The reduction from five Education Boards to a single Education Authority was intended to create a number of benefits, not simply in terms of consistency of policy and provision, but in terms of reducing cost and administration. While undoubtedly many savings have been realised through economies of scale, good work done by many throughout the system, and while it would be unfair to pass judgement on the EA at such an early stage in its life, for many schools the hand of bureaucracy throughout the system remains stubbornly tight.

Despite the complexity of our education system this is not a problem unique to Northern Ireland. Damien Hinds, Secretary of State for Education at Westminster has acknowledged that issues around workload and red tape remain of the “biggest threats” to recruitment to the teaching profession. Simply indicating an intent to reduce unnecessary administrative burdens is not enough, we need to find a mechanism to bring this about in practise.

One of the key complaints is duplication of information sought and given by the Department, EA, C2K, and sometimes sectoral bodies with repeated messages and reminders, alongside requests for effectively the same data in different formats. Online HR recruitment arrangements have become a time consuming tick box exercise and need reviewed. Clearer delineation of responsibilities around communication, along with move focused and centrally shared data could ease practical burdens. There is a key strategic question around what data is required and in what format and keep it to that. Rather than plunge into an Orwellian nightmare of the suppression of information, we are in danger of Huxley’s Brave New World of drowning the truth in a sea of irrelevance. We need to ensure
better and more expedient transfer of data on pupils throughout their school career, and particularly on transition between Primary and Post Primary, which would benefit both schools and individual pupils themselves. Similarly, the progression of online tools for parents around applications for places by the EA is a welcome development and similar online arrangements for payment by parents should be encouraged as a device to remove schools as an unnecessary middleman. Finally, in the same way as flow of information and communication downwards from a range of statutory sources can be frustrating, and lead to duplication, the appointment of clear single points of contact for schools would be extremely beneficial.

**INSPECTION**

Tensions around school inspections have been both a source of educational industrial dispute and a by-product of it. Genuine problems, together with miscommunication and misconception have run alongside the easy use of non co-operation as a tool for industrial action. This has led to problems with the state of the relationship between the Inspectorate and many schools, with a wider need for reform and refocus on inspection.

The ongoing development of models in other parts of the United Kingdom are of particular relevance to our situation. In Scotland, the inspection model is more focused on aligned support for schools, where gradings have been reduced from five to three- Very Confident, Confident and Not Confident. Most significantly, has been the new direction of travel of Ofsted with their recently published proposals “Education inspection framework 2019: inspecting the substance of education.” This is currently out for consultation and is being piloted, but the central thrust is to “treat providers (teachers and principals) as experts in their field and not as data managers”. The focus is to reduce bureaucracy, unnecessary production of data, have ultimately a more light touch regime, making a judgement on the quality of education provided, rather than placing too much weight on performance measures alone. This is a change of emphasis, to a more holistic approach, consistent with the high trust/lower burden approach to schools. While our two neighbouring jurisdictions are of critical value in analysing for local applicability, this should not preclude examination and consideration of other models. Rebranding of ETI to become in effect a Northern Ireland Educational Improvement Service, as recommended by the Northern Ireland Assembly Education Committee could help create a new dynamic in the relationship.

There are two key issues around how inspection is carried out - what is measured and what relationship exists between those who are carrying out the inspection and those who are being inspected. On measurement, there has been considerable misunderstanding and breakdown in communication on what data is required, despite the best endeavours of many to clarify and resolve. We should ensure that the information that is required to be produced during a school year is not duplicated, and is available to the relevant educational
authorities, and that no additional data is required to be produced for an inspection. Where appropriate, usage of light sampling should be considered as an assessment tool, which could also reduce the possibilities of data manipulation. The best schools tend to ones that are routinely self-evaluating and this should be used as evidence for inspection. A culture of self-evaluation should be promoted and embedded. Inspection should ultimately be more about the quality of education provided, and therefore judged on wider basis than simply data performance measures, and needs to reflect the environment in which the school operates, so that value added is a critical tool rather than bald results. There therefore needs to be a re-evaluation of the methodology of current measurements of how value added improvements are calculated.

Relationships are key to inspection, and trust needs to be rebuilt on both sides. As well as a greater level of respect, the approach needs to be more collaborative and co-operative in nature, with a common goal on how improvement is driven throughout schools. Ensuring that less pejorative descriptors are used in assessments would be helpful, as already happens in Scotland, and would help to build trust and relationships. The process should become more two way aimed at constructive discussion, agreed improvement outcomes and ultimately the availability of an independent appeals mechanism. A renewal of a close working relationship between District Inspectors and Principals would be helpful, with a greater emphasis on a pastoral supportive role. An enhanced new model for the District Inspector’s role is a critical element of a changed and re-invigorated relationship. Similarly, the availability of time limited two way secondments could develop a greater understanding of the challenges faced on both sides and combat a danger of staleness. The relationship with parents should also not be ignored, with consideration being given to the establishment by the Department of a parental consultation forum, utilising existing parent based organisations, and greater engagement being undertaken with parents.

SUPPORTING LEADERSHIP, PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND GOVERNANCE

There is a growing concern that many teachers see key positions of leadership responsibility, particularly becoming a Principal, as more trouble than it is worth. This is manifesting itself in a reluctance for applicants to put their names forward as candidates for such posts, with the result that some school principal posts lie vacant for a long time, particularly in rural areas, with the field of applicants greatly reduced in other vacancies.

Good leadership within schools needs to be made more attractive, and we need to re-establish a clear pathway for preparation for principalship. Internal succession training is not sufficient. Allied to this should be greater resource support for Continued Professional Development, with co-design and sometimes delivery from professionals and representative bodies on the ground, so that it is not imposed from above, helping to ensure relevance.
Some of the pressure can also be reduced on Principals, and therefore leadership made more attractive if there is a wider sharing of responsibilities encouraged through greater use of and responsibilities given to first line/middle managers amongst the teaching staff, (typically Heads of Department and Heads of Year), in effect moving beyond pastoral roles and playing a part in performance and standards through PRSD. This could only be achieved in practise if the greater focus on CPD was extended to include first line/ middle managers. This would not only facilitate the burden to be shared through an element of distributed leadership, but could also form part of the pathway towards preparation for higher leadership and eventual principalship.

A streamlined approach to administration and data production as well as more collaborative and co-operative approaches to inspection, should of themselves assist in reducing pressure and make such roles more attractive, but on a strategic basis the shift in ETI to a school improvement role should enable clearer guidance to be developed on pathways for programmes of improvement for schools and support for those in leadership of schools.

Pathways and preparation for leadership should not be the end point of support for school leaders, but rather part of a continuum which involves a more comprehensive approach to mentoring for those who are more recently appointed.

Governance within schools has a key role in shaping the success of our education system, and in a small minority of schools poor governance and a breakdown in relationships are central to individual school problems. It is right that examination of governance is a key component of inspection, and where difficulties have been established that work is carried out on an improvement agenda. There needs to be an examination on how we recruit, and effectively train those who take on this onerous civic task. Training must be seen as a relevant and necessary component of school governorship, in developing strategic skills, and encouragement must be given to enabling the widest pool of applicants, with a particular focus of building greater links between employers and Post Primary Schools.

There needs to be both greater recognition of and action taken in support of the Health and Well Being of the wider school community, embracing measures such as peer support for students and the rolling out of a province wide strategy, utilising best practise, for support for teachers, particularly those facing the pressures of school leadership positions. While this will require investment, there are huge dividends both financial and social to be drawn in terms of improved mental health, reductions in suicides and self-harm, and cost savings through lower absenteeism and substitute cover.
RECOMMENDATIONS

1 The education system adopts an overarching approach to administration and inspection to place greater levels of trust in schools and the professional expertise of the school workforce.

2 There should be greater collaboration, co-ordination and central data sharing between the Department of Education, the Education Authority, C2K and the relevant sectoral bodies to remove the need for duplication of requests for information from schools.

3 Clearer delineation and lines of communication between schools and educational bodies to enable, as much as possible, single points of contact for schools,

4 Better and more expedient transfer of data on pupils throughout their school career, particularly around the transition/transfer period between Primary and Post-Primary.

5 A review of HR arrangements around recruitment by schools to minimise the level of administrative burden.

6 Further progression of online tools for parents, particularly around payment methods, to reduce the need for schools to be administrative middlemen.

7 A refocusing of the model of school inspection to a more collaborative and co-operative approach, aligning inspection with a school improvement objective.

8 In line with this refocusing, assessment outcomes should become more of a constructive two-way process aimed at school improvement, with less pejorative descriptors.

9 Drawing from the lessons of changes in inspections in other jurisdictions, the emphasis of inspection should be to avoid placing undue weight on performance measures alone but instead placing wider consideration on the quality of education provided within that school or institution.

10 In line with a previous recommendation of the Northern Ireland Assembly Committee’s Report into inspection, the Education and Training Inspectorate should be rebranded as the Northern Ireland Educational Improvement Service (NIEIS).

11 A re-evaluation of the current methodology of assessing how value added improvements are calculated should be carried out.

12 Schools should not have to produce additional data for an inspection beyond that which they generate as part of normal school activity.

13 A culture of school self-evaluation should be promoted and embedded.

14 An enhanced new model for the District Inspector’s role should be developed with a greater emphasis on a supportive role provided to schools.

15 Two way secondments between schools and the Inspectorate to enhance greater understanding of each other’s responsibilities and challenges to be faced.
16 Consideration should be given as to how greater engagement can occur on inspection with parents on a strategic level, utilising existing parent representative bodies.

17 Establishment of a clearer pathway for preparation for principalship and school leadership roles.

18 Post appointment of school headship, a more comprehensive approach to mentoring is developed to give guidance and support to Principals in the early stages of their post.

19 A newly re focused ETI to develop clearer pathways of improvement guidance for schools and to play an advisory and supportive role for schools in implementation.

20 An enhancement of Continuing Professional Development with input and co-design by teaching professionals, representative teacher organisations and teacher training bodies, with this enhancement also to cover first line teacher middle managers, enabling leadership tasks and pressures to be more easily shared.

21 An examination of the recruitment and effectiveness of training of school governors to enhance strategic skills, with a focus on how the pool of School Governors is widened, with particular focus on Governor appointments to strengthening the link between employers and Post Primary Schools.

22 Greater recognition of, and action taken in support of, the Health and Well Being within the school community, embracing peer support for students, and rolling out best practise strategy for staff, particularly those facing the pressure of leadership positions.
CONSULTATION QUESTIONS

(1) What are your views on the level of administration required of schools by other educational bodies such as the Department of Education, the Education Authority and other relevant sectoral bodies?

(2) What actions should be taken to reduce administrative burdens on schools?

(3) What steps can be taken to ensure better sharing of data between education providers, particularly to benefit pupils throughout their educational journey?

(4) What are your views on the current model of inspection for schools and what improvements can be made in the system?

(5) What should the role of ETI be, and does this require a redesign of their functions?

(6) What should the balance be between external inspection and the development of increased self-evaluation within schools and greater professional autonomy for teachers?

(7) What are your views around current performance indicators within schools and on the production and use of data?

(8) How can value added improvements be better measured and recognised within our education system?

(9) What is your view of the current role of District Inspectors within the school system, and if it needs to change how should it change?

(10) How can the inspection process better engage with schools and parents?

(11) How can greater support be given to the development and nurturing of educational leadership at different levels within schools?

(12) How can Continuing Professional Development and structured pathways towards school leadership be enhanced within the system?

(13) How can the recruitment and training of school governors be improved?

(14) How can links and involvement between business and schools be increased and improved?

(15) What actions can be taken to create greater support for health and wellbeing within schools for both staff and students?
The Democratic Unionist Party values your views and input as we develop our policies.

Please send responses to info@mydup.com