

# OECD Reviews of Evaluation and Assessment in Education

## Northern Ireland, United Kingdom

### MAIN CONCLUSIONS

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This summary of main conclusions is drawn from *OECD Reviews of Evaluation and Assessment in Education: Northern Ireland, United Kingdom*. The full report is available on the project's website: [www.oecd.org/edu/evaluationpolicy](http://www.oecd.org/edu/evaluationpolicy).

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## Executive Summary

Compared internationally, pupils in Northern Ireland perform very well in assessments at the primary level, and around average at the post-primary level. However, compared to the OECD average, differences in pupil performance at age 15 are more strongly associated with their schools' socio-economic intake. Social deprivation varies significantly among local government districts, as shown by the proportion of pupils entitled to free school meals. Children follow 12 years of compulsory schooling from age 4 to 16, transferring to post-primary school at age 11. Some 43% of pupils are enrolled in academically selective post-primary schools and these, on average, have a more advantaged socio-economic intake. In some non-selective post-primary schools, there are high concentrations of pupils entitled to free school meals.

The vast majority of pupils are in public schools (grant-aided) and follow a common curriculum set out in four Key Stages (1 to 2 in primary and 3 to 4 in post-primary). At Key Stage 4, there is a common system of summative assessments that leads towards qualifications recognised throughout the United Kingdom. New assessment policies have been introduced to align with the Northern Ireland knowledge and skills based curriculum and to promote greater coherence between assessment practices in primary and post-primary schools. Since 2012/13, teachers are responsible for the summative assessment of pupils' cross-curricular skills at the end of Key Stages 1, 2 and 3. A central moderation system that engages working teachers has been introduced to ensure the reliability of these assessments.

There are also important policies to introduce more coherence in governance and school support services. Traditionally, public schools fall into distinct categories according to which body awards their funding and the type of school management. There is a proposal to establish an Education and Skills Authority (ESA) that would be responsible for all public schools and for providing school support services. Current policy aims to strengthen the role of the school's Board of Governors (BoG) in leading and managing the school.

In many ways, evaluation and assessment policies in Northern Ireland follow the principles identified by the OECD to develop a coherent framework for evaluation and assessment:

- There is a clear expectation that evaluation and assessment lead to improved pupil learning and outcomes. There are system-wide targets to improve both the quality and equality of pupil outcomes, and key policies communicate the expectation that learning targets are applied and followed at the individual pupil level. Diagnostic assessments are provided to primary schools to aid the assessment of pupils against key areas of the Northern Ireland curriculum, and school self-evaluation is firmly anchored in the school development planning process. The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) highlights key areas for improvement

identified in school inspections and the Department of Education has a mechanism to follow up schools identified as being in need of improvement.

- There is a strong focus in official policy on teacher professionalism, which is expected to strengthen the link to classroom activities. A new moderation procedure for pupil assessment in Key Stages 1, 2 and 3 gives a central role to teachers. There is also an approach to engage educators in pilots and the development of key policies.
- There is a clear intention to create synergies among pupil assessment, school evaluation, teacher and school leader appraisal and school system evaluation, and to bring these together into a more coherent framework. For example, teacher appraisal and professional development is linked to school development goals.
- There are systems to promote the use of evidence in evaluation and assessment activities. Schools benefit from sophisticated tools to support their self-evaluation activities. Central benchmarking information feeds into school inspection and school self-evaluation and, more recently, is sent directly to the BoG. School inspection collects first-hand evidence, notably with a strong component of classroom observation and provides a broader set of qualitative evidence on the school system.

However, there remain challenges to the effective implementation of assessment policies. An official review of the central computer-based assessments in primary schools has documented many implementation problems. The lack of continuity in central tests seems to have presented considerable challenges to schools. There are also tensions around the implementation of teacher assessment against the Levels of Progression. There may be a duplication of evaluation activities in schools with highly developed self-evaluation capacity, and policies to better align school inspection to school self-evaluation are expected to address this. The OECD review team has identified ways to further consolidate the evaluation and assessment framework.

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*Prioritise efforts to effectively implement the evaluation and assessment framework*

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The OECD underlines the importance of communicating the long-term vision of what evaluation and assessment policies aim to achieve. An analysis of evidence on Northern Ireland's school system suggests two significant aims would be to improve the quality and equality of pupil learning outcomes and to promote social cohesion. There is a sound approach to engaging educators in the piloting and review of different assessment policies. Such reviews are critical in building credibility for the new approach and provide a mechanism for listening to schools, recognising any limitations, and addressing issues as a matter of priority. There is a need to validate the diagnostic tests and to ensure these meet educators' needs, for example, by incorporating as much as possible the functionalities that schools appreciate in the most frequently used commercial tests.

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*Continue to build capacity for evaluation and assessment*

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Teacher professionalism is a key pillar of the evaluation and assessment framework and there is a need to ensure that teacher appraisal is followed up with adequate

professional learning opportunities. It is important to plan for innovative ways to organise local delivery of learning opportunities. “Professional learning” can happen where practitioners visit other schools, exchange practical advice and conduct action research. The proposed ESA presents a significant opportunity to harmonise and strengthen the support offered to schools by drawing on the extensive experience in the existing support bodies and identifying their most effective practices. It is critical that educators are seriously engaged in helping to design these services. Given the importance of school self-evaluation it is essential to ensure adequate self-evaluation capacity among school leadership. The best aspects of existing training for school leadership, including the ETI’s associate assessor scheme with its focus on classroom observation, should feed into the new support services. Identifying BoGs that have effective evaluation models can help to design further materials and specific training to develop capacity for school leader appraisal. At the central level, there is room to strengthen the ETI’s capacity to undertake risk assessment with a stronger data analysis function. In the longer term, it may be prudent to secure central capacity to develop diagnostic assessments for schools and to ensure their continuity and heightened functionality.

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*Further develop reference standards for evaluation and assessment*

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To ensure coherence between initial teacher education, registration, appraisal and professional development, it is essential to promote the wider use of the teacher competence standards as a working document in schools. A review of the use of teaching standards and criteria by schools can be used to revise the teaching standards and to develop clearer descriptions of the competencies necessary for different roles and career steps for teachers. Professional standards for school leadership can promote excellence, provide common reference criteria and contribute to a fair, valid and reliable appraisal process. Educators can help to further develop the Levels of Progression to make sure these are useful for formative assessment.

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*Align reporting systems to priority goals and promote a greater sharing of information on pupil progress through the school system*

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Given the priority of equity in the government’s programme of work, a more prominent and focused reporting on this is recommended. It will also be important to ensure a consistent approach to reporting on equity in school evaluation and system evaluation. Research into the relative advantages of different measures for equity would ensure credibility for the choice of the major measure of pupil entitlement to free school meals. The introduction of a moderation process holds great potential to more effectively monitor the progress of student learning across Key Stages 1, 2 and 3. At the stage of transition from primary to post-primary schooling, there may be quick and efficient ways to capitalise on the potential of C2k school-based information systems to share key assessment information. There is room to develop a more systematic longitudinal research strategy and to draw on the Education and Training Inspectorate’s insight to cross-departmental challenges and priorities.



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## Conclusions and recommendations of the OECD Review of Evaluation and Assessment in Northern Ireland

### School system context

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*Within the United Kingdom, Northern Ireland has had power over educational policy since 1999*

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Northern Ireland has had a politically difficult past with conflict and a highly divided society. In 1998 powers were devolved within the United Kingdom to a newly established Northern Ireland Assembly. Since 2007 there is a power sharing agreement between five political parties. The locally elected Minister of Education is responsible for setting policy direction and targets for the school system. Pupils in Northern Ireland study towards qualifications that are recognised throughout the United Kingdom within a National Qualifications Framework.

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*Nearly all pupils in Northern Ireland attend a public school, but this system is highly fragmented*

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Children follow 12 years of compulsory schooling from age 4 to 16, transferring to post-primary school at age 11. The vast majority of pupils are in public schools (grant-aided) and follow a common curriculum set out in 4 Key Stages (1 to 2 in primary and 3 to 4 in post-primary), with a common system of summative assessments. However, there are distinct school categories for public schools according to which body awards their funding and the type of school management. While the Department of Education directly funds 31% of post-primary school and 3% of primary schools, the local authorities (the five Education and Library Boards) fund the majority of schools and are the employing authority for teachers in “controlled schools”, in which 80% of pupils are of Protestant denomination. Teachers in “Catholic maintained schools” are employed by the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS). There is a proposal to bring more coherence to this system with the establishment of an Education and Skills Authority (ESA) that would be responsible for all public schools. In practice, the Board of Governors (BoG) in all schools is responsible for leading and managing the school. Current policy aims to further develop and strengthen its role.

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*Economic disparities impact schooling, particularly at post-primary level in international comparison*

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While the unemployment rate is slightly below the OECD average, there is a high rate of economic inactivity in Northern Ireland. Social deprivation varies significantly among local government districts, as shown by the proportion of pupils entitled to free school meals. Compared internationally, the school's socio-economic composition explains a much larger proportion of difference in outcomes at age 15 in Northern Ireland. Regardless of management type, post-primary schools fall into two major categories: academically selective (mainly “grammar schools”) and non-selective schools. Some 43% of pupils are enrolled in academically selective post-primary schools; a proportion that has increased slightly despite a drop in the total number of children in the Northern Ireland school system. Selective post-primary schools show a range of socio-economic intake from only 1% to 23% of pupils entitled to free school meals, but in all cases this remains below the average of 28% for non-selective post-primary schools. In some non-selective post-primary schools, there are high concentrations of pupils entitled to free school meals.

## Strengths and challenges

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*Evaluation and assessment policies recognise the importance of a coherent approach, but there is room to go further*

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In important ways, Northern Ireland stands out internationally. As in all systems within the OECD review, different components (pupil assessment, school evaluation, teacher and school leader appraisal and school system evaluation) have been developed at different stages, but policy development in Northern Ireland aims to bring these together into a more coherent framework. The Department of Education's policies recognise many of the potential synergies among these different components: school inspection pays attention to pupil assessment policies and pupil involvement in assessing their own and their peers' learning; annual objectives for teachers are linked to a school's self-evaluation of its development needs; the Board of Governors should ensure that the principal annually reviews teacher performance and professional development needs; the school development planning process is evaluated by school inspectors and any recommendations for improvement should feed into the School Development Plan. However, there is a need to generate synergies in other areas: school inspection may double up on some self-evaluation activities in schools where these are highly developed; the role of teacher registration is not clear and there is limited use of the results of teacher appraisal to inform career progression.

A coherent evaluation framework ensures consistency in procedures. A major challenge to the Northern Ireland evaluation and assessment framework is the duplication of pupil assessment procedures. To address this, the introduction of a moderation procedure for end of Key Stage assessments is expected to increase trust among primary

and post-primary schools in the reliability of teacher assessments and reduce the use of additional assessment procedures. However, there is also a need to address inconsistencies in the implementation of school leader and teacher appraisal.

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*Evaluation and assessment policies aim to better connect to classrooms, but teachers report concerns on implementation*

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There is a strong focus in official policy on teacher professionalism, which is a desirable principle in designing assessment policies that aim to strengthen the link to classroom activities. The new moderation procedure for key stage assessment gives a central role to teachers. There is also an approach to engage educators in pilots and the development of key policies. While the OECD review team noted some concerns on the feedback of teacher views in specific pilots, the general approach is sound and the revision of the policy on computer-based assessments in primary schools indicates that teacher feedback is taken seriously. If constructive professional feedback from teachers over the new procedures is not adequately addressed, there is a real risk that implementation will remain tokenistic. Particularly in the context of a long established and polarised political debate over academic selection at age 11.

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*Expectation that evaluation and assessment lead to improved pupil learning and outcomes, but concerns over school support services*

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There are system-wide targets to improve both the quality and equality of pupil outcomes in Northern Ireland. Key policies communicate the expectation that learning targets are applied and followed at the individual pupil level. Diagnostic assessments are provided to primary schools to aid the assessment of pupils against key areas of the Northern Ireland curriculum. Over recent years, the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) has introduced a clearer reporting format for individual school inspection reports to highlight key areas for improvement, with the assessment of pupil learning outcomes being an important part of school inspection. For many years schools have benefitted from supporting tools for school self-evaluation. However, the priority attributed to school support services has been found to vary across Education and Library Boards. The proposed Education and Skills Authority (ESA) would take over responsibility for school support services, but at the time of the OECD review there was a high degree of uncertainty among educators about the form the new support model would take. School inspection identifies schools most in need of improvement, which sends the signal for support services to primarily target these schools. This is likely to impact on a wider offer of professional development services to all schools.

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*New procedures to assess cross-curricular skills support the further implementation of the Northern Ireland curriculum*

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The 2007 Northern Ireland curriculum focuses on knowledge (key areas of learning) and skills (Communication or Literacy; Using Mathematics or Numeracy; Using ICT; and Thinking Skills and Personal Capabilities). It aims to allow more flexibility for teachers

to exercise their professional judgement in organising lessons, and to better connect learning across the curriculum. Since 2012/13, schools follow new statutory assessment procedures at Key Stages 1, 2 and 3 that are designed to support the curriculum. Teachers are responsible for pupil assessment and must report to parents on their child's progress in all areas of the curriculum on at least an annual basis. A set of learning standards (Levels of Progression) has been developed to support a coherent assessment of pupil progress across Key Stages 1, 2 and 3 in Communication, Using Mathematics and Using ICT. Pupils are assessed by their teachers to see if they have reached the expected levels in these skills at the end of each Key Stage. Central computer-based assessments are offered to primary schools to support pupil assessment in Communication and Using Mathematics in Key Stages 1 and 2.

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*Policies promote formative assessment that involves pupils, but teachers raise concerns over the Levels of Progression*

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Formative assessment has been widely documented to have a strong positive impact on teaching and learning and is embedded in the curricula of many OECD countries. In Northern Ireland, formative assessment is at the core of the official assessment strategy to support the revised curriculum. School inspection indicators of high quality teaching and learning include the effective use of assessment data, formative assessment and the involvement of pupils in self- and peer-assessments. Teachers' professional judgement is central to the new summative assessments in Communication and Using mathematics at the end of Key Stages 1, 2 and 3, which is also likely to strengthen the integration of formative assessment in the classroom. However, teacher representatives reported that early experiences had raised questions on how meaningful the broad Levels of Progression will be for formative purposes. Depending on how widespread such concerns are, this could identify a need to further develop them. At the early stage of implementation, there seemed to be some demand to develop further supporting tools, including more sample assessment tasks for teachers.

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*Providing central diagnostic tests at the primary level is a good policy, but several concerns were raised about them*

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The introduction of a centrally developed, computer-based assessment tool for diagnostic purposes fits well with an official assessment strategy that focuses on assessment for learning. It supports a wider national strategy to reduce inequities in pupil outcomes, as tests provide feedback to schools on pupil performance standardised to Northern Ireland's school population. It could also introduce efficiencies at the school level, as many schools pay for commercial standardised tests. The central tests generate feedback on pupil progress for parents. However, public sector procurement requirements resulted in the introduction of a new set of tests in 2012/13. During the first year of implementation, teachers reported technical problems and raised concerns about their functionality. An official review has documented these implementation problems and the use of these tests in 2013/14 is not compulsory. The lack of continuity in central tests seems to have presented considerable challenges to schools.

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*Regular reporting on pupil progress to parents, but limited exchanges between primary and post-primary schools*

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There is a strong framework for reporting to parents on their child’s learning progress. Teachers are required to provide an annual report on pupil progress from Years 1 to 14. An additional requirement from Years 4 to 7 is for teachers to meet with parents and to provide written feedback on pupil performance in the computer-based assessments. These central tests include a special function to generate progress reports for parents, although teachers have identified a need to make these reports more informative for parents. Partly as a consequence of the moderation procedures at primary level being voluntary for many years, the reliability of the assessment data they provide is not trusted and is largely ignored by post-primary schools. However, there has been no culture of feedback from post-primary schools to primary schools and most post-primary schools re-test pupils upon entry. The new moderation of teacher assessment against Levels of Progression will address concerns on the reliability of results, but many post-primary schools would like to receive more detailed assessment information on “Level 4” pupils. For several years, a large proportion of post-primary schools administer commercial entrance tests, which duplicate assessment procedures for pupils and reportedly influence teaching practices in some primary schools, as teachers prepare pupils for these entrance tests.

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*A well designed teacher appraisal model is linked to school development, but it could better meet individual teacher needs*

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The Performance Review and Staff Development Scheme (PRSD) is a comprehensive teacher appraisal system for all teachers in grant aided schools, based on a number of internationally recognised good principles. Teachers’ representative organisations played a role in its development and participate in its review every two years. It is clearly oriented towards staff development and the continuous improvement of practices. The annual process involves two lesson observations, a discussion of these observations between the reviewer and the teacher, and an action plan with objectives for personal and professional development in the following year. Teachers also get feedback from school inspectors as part of the lesson observations during school inspections. Internationally, the teacher appraisal model stands out in its clear intention to create synergies between teacher appraisal, school self-evaluation and school development. The teacher appraisal process is strongly school-based and one or two of the three personal objectives teachers set in their appraisal are typically school-wide objectives. However, too strong a focus on whole-school priorities reduces the relevance of the PRSD process for individual teachers and many teachers identify a need for professional development that better meets individual needs and provides specific and relevant training.

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*A common understanding of what constitutes good teaching guides initial education, but is underused by professionals*

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The teacher competence model describes 27 competences that teachers are expected to develop throughout their initial education and professional careers and includes a Code

of Values and Professional Practice that provides a clear common reference for teacher appraisal. The model plays an important role in providing coherence across initial teacher education and the early years of a teacher's career. It clarifies what is expected of new teachers and creates a common language and reference for all those involved. It is also used as a reference for evaluating teaching and learning quality during school inspections. However, challenges remain in ensuring that it is also used as a reference for other aspects of the profession, namely: registration, regular teacher appraisal through PRSD and continuing professional development. The main references for the PRSD process are the three personal objectives set for each teacher at the school level. Most reviewers involved in conducting PRSD processes for their peers have not received any training to appraise teachers in relation to the competence standards.

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*A professional body conducts a registration process, but this has little relevance to career and professional development*

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The General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland (GTCNI) is an independent, professional and registration body for teachers. The Council provides advice to the Department of Education on standards of teaching and is responsible for the professional registration of teachers and accrediting education courses for pre-service teachers. The registration process provides accurate information about the composition and characteristics of the teaching profession, which is a key source of information for the development of teacher policy and aids schools with recruitment processes. While the registration functions as an official confirmation of a teacher's eligibility to teach, it does not involve an appraisal of the teacher's performance or an attestation of teachers' actual competences, and it does not correspond to a step within the teacher's career. All teachers having completed their initial education will be granted access to registration if they follow the required administrative procedure and annually renew the payment of a £44 registration fee.

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*School inspection is evidence based with strong quality assurance, but risk assessment presents new demands*

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The school inspection framework is broad, supported by international school effectiveness research and published and promoted for school use, which ensures transparency in criteria used. The ETI has several quality assurance procedures: an independent customer service evaluation; an independent annual collection of feedback from schools that have been inspected; a code of good conduct for inspectors; training; guidance materials, including common quality indicators that are complemented with illustrations of good practice; and the regular review and updating of guidance documents. The engagement of school leaders and other senior staff as associate assessors strengthens the ETI's working knowledge of schools. The ETI uses first-hand evidence via the collection of information from different stakeholders, an examination of pupils' work, and direct observation of the teaching and learning process. The collection of multiple perspectives on school quality from parents, teachers and other school staff helps to increase objectivity in evaluation results. However, the ETI does not have an established data analysis function and with this model it is restricted in its ability to move fully to a risk-based assessment system.

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*Policy supports school self-evaluation and promotes alignment with school inspection, but in some schools there may be a duplication of evaluation efforts*

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The legal requirement for a School Development Plan was revised in 2010 to set clear specifications of the areas to be covered and an expectation that evaluation is underpinned by performance and other data. School inspection evaluates leadership and management, which includes the school development planning process, use of data among school staff, the quality of action planning, and the challenge and support function played by the BoG. There is well-established support to schools to promote the use of data in self-evaluation activities. The ETI has developed guidance material and promotes the use of inspection criteria. All grant-aided schools are provided with a centrally developed information management and analysis system that can support school self-evaluation by giving schools considerable flexibility in uploading all types of information, from continuous assessments to summative assessments. Some schools use this to monitor outcomes and learning progress throughout the school. This system can generate information for the ETI during school inspections. For the past 10 years, schools have received a benchmarking and target setting data package from the Department of Education. Data packages are now sent directly to the BoG with the aim to further stimulate their role in self-evaluation activities and, where applicable, to support their responsibility in school principal appraisal. Arguably as a result of this support, the ETI and the Regional Training Unit have identified many schools with well-informed classroom observation arrangements linking into school self-evaluation processes. In such cases, school inspections may duplicate some self-evaluation efforts.

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*School inspection emphasises school improvement, but there is a need to mitigate fears around the formal intervention process*

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The Department of Education's key policy for school improvement, Every School a Good School (ESaGS), emphasises that improvement belongs to the school. Formal school inspections identify areas for improvement (and these are detailed in inspection reports) and it is expected that schools address these. Inspectors give oral feedback to teachers whose lessons have been observed, and to school leadership on the results of surveys administered to parents, teachers and other staff. A system of visits from District Inspectors outside the formal inspection process can provide timely feedback for improvement. The Department of Education uses a Formal Intervention Process to follow up on schools with important identified areas for improvement and there is evidence that this is making a difference, as has been the experience in other OECD systems. However, the identification of schools in need of improvement is a difficult and delicate process and the clarity of procedures is crucial. While procedures are outlined in ESaGS, some stakeholders raised concerns around the nature of communicating with schools and the role of the media in this process. This appeared to be underpinned by anxiety around the future support services on offer to schools. The ESaGS policy envisages an important role for the proposed ESA.

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*Specific goals to promote equity in the school system, but a need to align reporting systems to new priorities*

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Linked to the wider government strategy to tackle disadvantage, the Department of Education has an overarching goal to increase equity and equality and to close the performance gap. This sets important references for system evaluation and communicates the importance of addressing the significant equity challenges in the Northern Ireland school system. To signal this increased political focus, there are specific targets for improvement in key outcomes for pupils entitled to free school meals, and since 2010/11, statistical reporting on school leavers includes information for young people with special educational needs. These reporting developments provide useful information for system evaluation. However, some stakeholders voiced concern on the adequacy of reporting systems to measure equity. In particular, perceptions that the measure of pupil entitlement to free school meals does not adequately reflect deprivation is a risk to the credibility of system and school evaluation approaches.

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*A new moderation procedure will provide more reliable and valid system measures, but presents challenges*

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A concern to ensure the reliability of teacher assessments at the end of Key Stages 1, 2 and 3 has led to the introduction of a mandatory moderation system. The design of this system has strong potential to promote and build teacher capacity to assess pupils against the Levels of Progression. The aggregate results will also provide a rounded and more valid measure for system evaluation. However, the previous policy to report information by schools for accountability purposes, but within a system of voluntary moderation, has left a legacy of widespread distrust in such measures. There is therefore an urgent need to build confidence in the new measures by sufficiently engaging educators in the proposed moderation system. The use of new measures will also entail communication challenges to allow the meaningful interpretation of trends over time. In particular, an inadequate communication strategy runs the risk of real or perceived political, or other, misuse of the results, which will increase the tension on educator engagement in the new moderation system.

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*An approach to better mobilise evidence for policy making, but a need to better anticipate future reporting needs*

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Northern Ireland has rich information and evidence on its school system and has several approaches to feed this most effectively into policy making. A series of “statistical press releases” reflect international best practice. These complement the reporting of tabular or graphic raw statistics and include guidance on how to interpret the results, with clear information on statistical limitations. The most recent edition of the Chief Inspector’s biennial report presents evaluation results against three major priorities for the system in Northern Ireland, as well as for different sectors. This renders the findings immediately more accessible for policy makers and allows a good understanding of relative priorities among the different educational sectors. System reporting is an important mechanism to reflect priorities and there is a need to be more strategic in

identifying future information needs. Current reporting systems present a fragmented structure, and changes to the organisation and provision of schooling opportunities to young people will require significant changes in system level reporting.

## Policy recommendations

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*Continue the focus on teacher professionalism and engage educators in designing future school support services*

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For the evaluation and assessment framework to impact on classroom practice, it will need to place considerable emphasis on its developmental function. Channels that are likely to reinforce links to classroom practice include: an emphasis on teacher appraisal for the continuous improvement of teaching practices; ensuring teaching standards are aligned with student learning objectives; involving teachers in school evaluation, in particular through conceiving school self-evaluation as a collective process with responsibilities for teachers; ensuring that teachers are seen as the main experts not only in instructing but also in assessing their students, so teachers feel the ownership of student assessment and accept it as an integral part of teaching and learning; building teacher capacity for student formative assessment; and building teachers' ability to assess against educational standards.

A strong focus on professionalism implies the need for a significant, sustained and focused investment in professional development. The OECD review team underlines the opportunity to improve school support services with the proposed Education and Skills Authority. It is critical that educators are seriously engaged in helping to design these services. Teachers are best placed to communicate the reality of classroom teaching and the major demands for professional development and can play a crucial role in communicating relative priorities.

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*Prioritise efforts to effectively implement the evaluation and assessment framework*

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The OECD underlines the importance of communicating the long-term vision of what evaluation and assessment policies aim to achieve. Individuals and groups are more likely to accept changes that are not necessarily in their own best interest if they understand the reasons for the changes and can see the role they should play within the broad national strategy. This includes dissemination of the evidence basis underlying the policy diagnosis, the research findings on alternative policy options and their likely impact, as well as information on the costs of reform vs. inaction. Such communication and dissemination is critical to gain the support of society at large for educational evaluation reforms, not just the stakeholders with a direct interest. An analysis of evidence on Northern Ireland's school system suggests two significant aims would be to improve the quality and equality of pupil learning outcomes and to promote social cohesion.

In Northern Ireland, there is a sound approach to engaging educators in the piloting and review of different assessment policies. The OECD underlines the importance of reviewing and refining policies during the implementation phase. This is essential for building and ensuring continued commitment from stakeholders, as seen in Northern

Ireland with the review of the computer-based assessments at the primary level conducted in 2013. Such reviews are critical in building credibility for the new approach and provide a mechanism for listening to schools, recognising any limitations, and addressing issues as a matter of priority. The policy to provide a central diagnostic tool at the primary level to support pupil assessment in literacy and numeracy is commendable and will help to align assessment practices with the curriculum. The subsequent decision to continue to refine these tests and to offer them to schools, underlines the commitment to providing supporting tools for schools to monitor pupil learning progress. However, there is room to more systematically engage educators in the discussion of evaluation and assessment results; particularly in the deliberation of how to develop policies to address identified challenges.

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*Engage educators in improving the use of Levels of Progression for formative assessment*

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The Council for Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) involved teachers in developing the LoP, and research indicates that this is likely to promote a better use of the assessment criteria. The CCEA's engagement of working teachers in the new moderation procedure will become an important new channel for professional development, and there is a great opportunity in the new moderation procedure to promote a common understanding of assessment in key areas across the primary and post-primary sectors. Educators can contribute assessment tasks to an evaluation portal that provides support for formative assessment. This would promote an open exchange of different assessment tasks among professionals, shed light on the types of tasks being used in different schools for Levels 2, 3, 4 and 5, and promote a better understanding of assessment against each of the LoP. It could also be used to ensure that educators take a lead role in providing finer details within each level, and could encourage a higher degree of professional accountability and a continual discussion of valid assessment against the LoP. Although experience from other OECD countries reveals that it is not an easy task to develop criteria that are clear and widely agreed upon, there appears to be demand among educators to do so. It will be important to engage a broad and representative cross-section of teachers in these efforts.

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*Facilitate and promote the exchange of pupil information from primary to post-primary schools*

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A more fruitful and effective exchange of information between primary and post-primary schools would strengthen and better promote the curriculum's focus on the progression of pupil learning over the different Key Stages. The assessment arrangements at Key Stages 1 and 2 should form the basis of transitional information following pupils in their journey to Key Stage 3, to whichever type of post-primary. Primary and post-primary schools will need to come to an agreement as to what kind of supplementary assessment data is useful, in particular at the individual level, and the requirements for the generation of this assessment data. In this process it would be important to listen to the needs of the post-primary schools to minimise the duplication of assessment for pupils. At the same time, the common approach should maximise the use of existing information on pupil performance available in many primary schools. It may be necessary to enhance the functionality of the Schools Information Management System to ensure an effective transfer of information across schools.

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*Validate the central diagnostic tools and ensure they respond to educators' needs*

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The motivation to develop central computer based assessments is to provide powerful pedagogical tools for teachers to assess student learning and shape teaching to meet learner needs. These tools should support the implementation of the curriculum and assessment in relation to the Levels of Progression. However, there have clearly been

implementation challenges that have damaged the credibility of central tests implemented in 2012/13 and there is a need to build an evidence-based case for the validity of these tests. Through a new validation process, the CCEA should ensure that these tests incorporate as much as possible the functionalities that schools appreciate in the most frequently used commercial tests. If this is done successfully, it will reduce schools' needs for commercial tests. In addition, the reporting function in the tests should provide useful feedback for parents and educators. At both the primary and post-primary levels, the OECD review team identified a wish for a diagnostic measure that could be used to monitor the progress of an individual pupil and cohort progression through the school. Such educator needs should be kept in mind when developing and validating future tools.

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*Review the teacher competence model and use this as a basis for a career structure*

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A framework of teaching standards is an important reference point for teacher appraisal. To ensure coherence between initial teacher education, registration, appraisal and professional development, it is essential to promote the wider use of the competence standards as a working document in schools. It would be helpful to conduct a review of the use of teaching standards and criteria by schools to understand how the competence model could better fit their needs. It would then be the role of the GTCNI to use the results of the review to revise the teaching standards in close collaboration with stakeholders in schools. It would be useful to develop clearer descriptions of the competencies necessary for different roles and career steps for teachers. This would not necessarily require different standards across stages of the teaching career, but could involve a single set of standards with appraisal criteria specific to distinct career levels. Such a revision of the competence standards would help recognise the variety of responsibilities in today's schools and the expertise developed throughout a career. The description of competences should be complemented by criteria and illustrations of effective practice, to help make the standards operational for regular use in school-based teacher appraisal.

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*Ensure that teacher appraisal is followed up with adequate professional learning opportunities*

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The use of PRSD for developmental appraisal should be consolidated. While the process should be school-based and retain its close link to the School Development Plan, it should be underpinned by the revised competence model and potentially be externally validated through school inspection. Ideally, teacher appraisal should result in tailored feedback for each teacher, which should be followed up with learning opportunities through professional development, mentoring or other means. It is important to plan for innovative ways to organise local delivery of learning opportunities and there is a need to envisage teachers' learning as something broader than participation in training courses. "Professional learning" is an internal process in which teachers create professional knowledge through interaction with information in a way that challenges previous assumptions and creates new meanings. This can happen where practitioners visit other schools, exchange practical advice and conduct action research. With the introduction of the Entitlement Framework, Area Learning Communities can promote professional learning, by strengthening collaboration and peer learning.

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*Establish a competence-based career structure for teachers and conceive registration as career-progression appraisal*

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To recognise and reward teaching excellence and allow teachers to diversify their careers, schools and teachers could benefit from a more elaborate career structure. This should match the different types and levels of expertise described in the revised teacher competence standards and make sure that career pathways are varied, with some teachers moving into leadership roles while others remain predominantly teaching in the classroom. Access to each career stage could be associated with a formal appraisal process through the teacher registration system that is based on a review of teachers' actual practice. Graduates from initial teacher education would apply to be "provisionally registered" with the GTCNI and then apply for full registration upon completion of their Induction and Early Professional Development Programme. Access to a promotion for fully registered teachers could be through a voluntary application process and teachers would be required to periodically renew their registration status. Appraisal for registration and registration renewal could be mostly a school-based process, but should include an external view, for example through an accredited external evaluator, which could be a teacher from another school with expertise in the same area.

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*Ensure a healthy balance between external challenge and support to schools*

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In Northern Ireland, both challenge and support functions are long established and the key school improvement policy envisages a balance in these functions. While the Department of Education has the ability to challenge schools that are in most need of improvement through the Formal Intervention Process, at the time of the OECD review, the support function was in a state of flux with the winding down of the traditional support services to schools and the fact that the ESA had yet to be established. Experiences in other OECD systems indicate that the identification of areas for improvement is not enough and underscore the importance of building school capacity to undertake improvement actions. The proposed ESA presents a significant opportunity to harmonise and strengthen the support offered to schools by drawing on the extensive experience in the existing support bodies, and identifying their most effective practices. At the same time, the ESA can help support the BoG in undertaking its regular challenge and support role.

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*Keep the focus on improvement and go further in linking school inspection with school self-evaluation capacity*

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The OECD recommends external school evaluation adapts to reflect the maturity of the school self-evaluation culture and supports the move to a more proportionate and risk based school inspection approach in Northern Ireland. Systems should only move to a more proportionate approach once the evaluation culture is consolidated, evaluation capacity in schools is satisfactory, and data gathering and analysis within the school evaluation framework is established. Northern Ireland is a system that meets such

requirements: there are well-established systems for data collection that can feed into school evaluation at both the central and school levels; many schools exhibit a high level and sophistication of self-evaluation activities; the ETI has helped to build school leadership capacity in classroom observation and self-evaluation activities via its engagement of associate assessors; and as part of the inspection process the ETI directly assesses a school's self-evaluation processes and how these are used to manage and improve school quality. Therefore, there is a good evidence base for introducing a more proportionate approach to school inspections. The ETI continuously evaluates its approach and in 2013/14 now accepts a school's own self-evaluation and does not require schools to complete a specific evaluation form, which had initially been used to support the development of the self-evaluation process. This is expected to further improve the link with self-evaluation. For risk assessment, an additional key criterion could be a link with the CCEA's moderation feedback on the school's application of standards for end of Key Stage assessment.

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*Strengthen capacity for risk-based assessment within the ETI*

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The analysis of data in inspection activities, coupled with well documented procedures on decision rules for professional evaluation, is key to strengthening the standardisation of external school evaluation. The ETI benefits from external statistical and research capacity, but it also gathers data first hand when conducting school inspections, and this forms an important part of the evidence base. With the introduction of a new risk-based approach it is crucial that the ETI is able to direct the analyses and develop new indicators in key areas, including on pupil performance and school self-evaluation capacity. Without doubling up on current data collection processes, there is an argument for bringing together all different strands of data and research into a common knowledge base. This will bring evidence into close relation with the ETI's working processes and allow the development of an integrated body of knowledge on school quality. This can also more efficiently inform the ETI's risk assessment.

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*Promote heightened consistency in school self-evaluation and build the evaluation capacity of school leaders and the BoG*

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With school self-evaluation at the core of school improvement, there are ever pressing needs to ensure adequate self-evaluation capacity among school leadership. The identification of the best aspects of existing training for school leadership should be a priority in redesigning support services in the proposed ESA. There is room for a more active collaboration with the ETI in redesigning these services by promoting its specific training offered to associate assessors, notably the techniques for classroom observation. Although a group of volunteers, the BoG holds important evaluation responsibilities and it is important to develop guidance materials and training to support, in particular, its capacity to undertake task and classroom observations as part of the annual appraisal of school principals. Already, the ETI individual inspection reports comment on the BoG under the evaluation of leadership and management, and this can identify effective evaluation models. While the capacity of those conducting appraisal is of key importance, professional standards for school leadership can promote excellence, provide common reference criteria and contribute to a fair, valid and reliable appraisal process.

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*Raise the profile of equity goals and research ways to more effectively monitor and report on these*

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Given the priority of equity in the government's programme of work, a more prominent and focused reporting on this is recommended. A simple approach could be to have a dedicated space on the Department of Education's website that provides an easy overview of all system-level information on equity. This would bring together the different research briefings on pupils with special educational needs, pupils in deprived areas, etc. It will also be important to ensure a consistent approach to reporting on equity in school evaluation and system evaluation. Research into the relative advantages of different measures for equity would ensure credibility for the choice of the major measure of pupil entitlement to free school meals. Greater transparency in this area is critical given the high level goals for school and system improvement.

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*Prioritise clear communication on the nature and purpose of the new system-level measures and secure capacity for this*

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The OECD recommends a clear communication that the primary purpose of the end of Key Stage assessments should be to inform the subsequent learning of the individual pupil and to report levels of pupil progress to pupils and parents. The decision to collect information in discrete areas (i.e. the cross-curricular skills) of pupil assessment at the end of Key Stages 1, 2 and 3 seeks to balance requirements for performance information on the school system, which can be used to improve the system. A clear communication of the purpose of assessment includes regular evaluation and review of the system, and feedback on the extent to which it supports high-quality instruction. A long-term communication strategy should draw on feedback from stakeholders and from evaluation activities conducted by the CCEA, and promote best practice examples, perhaps identified via school inspections.

There will need to be an assessment of demands on capacity at the school level and centrally in the CCEA. Schools that have demonstrated consistency in initial verifications could earn an accredited status and be trusted to conduct moderation processes. There would be a periodic reaccreditation process and school internal quality assurance processes for key stage assessment could be evaluated as part of school inspections. Within the CCEA, there is already significant capacity for the development of tasks and other pupil assessment items. There may be a role in the longer term to secure central capacity to develop diagnostic assessments for schools and to ensure their continuity and heightened functionality.

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*Develop a strategy to more effectively monitor the progress of pupil learning throughout the system*

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The introduction of a moderation process holds great potential to more effectively monitor the progress of student learning across Key Stages 1, 2 and 3. At the stage of

transition from primary to post-primary schooling, there may be quick and efficient ways to capitalise on the potential of C2k school-based information systems to share key assessment information. There is room to develop a more systematic longitudinal research strategy and to implement responsible research using a Unique Pupil Reference Number. The Education and Training Inspectorate has a unique position within Northern Ireland's policy arena as it evaluates the quality of the educational experience for young children before compulsory schooling, throughout schooling and through to further education, as well as the provision of teacher education. This presents a unique insight to cross-departmental challenges and priorities and can be used as a vehicle to identify priorities for further research.