



Department of Education and Skills  
IRELAND

# OECD Review on Evaluation and Assessment Frameworks for Improving School Outcomes

## **COUNTRY BACKGROUND REPORT FOR IRELAND**

**March 2012**

This report was prepared by the Department of Education and Skills, Ireland, as an input to the OECD Review on Evaluation and Assessment Frameworks for Improving School Outcomes. The document was prepared in response to guidelines the OECD provided to all countries. The opinions expressed are not necessarily those of the OECD or its Member countries. Further information about the OECD Review is available at [www.oecd.org/edu/evaluationpolicy](http://www.oecd.org/edu/evaluationpolicy).



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## ACRONYMS USED IN THIS REPORT

<b>AfL</b>	Assessment for Learning
<b>CPD</b>	Career and Professional Development
<b>DEIS</b>	Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools
<b>DES</b>	Department of Education and Skills
<b>EPSEN</b>	Economic and Social Research Institute
<b>ERC</b>	Education for Persons with Special Education Needs
<b>ESRI</b>	Educational Research Centre
<b>ESRU</b>	Evaluation Support and Research Unit
<b>FETAC</b>	Further Education and Training Awards Council
<b>ICT</b>	Information and Communication Technologies
<b>IEP</b>	Individual Education Plan
<b>LCA</b>	Leaving Certificate Applied
<b>LCVP</b>	Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme
<b>NCCA</b>	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
<b>NCSE</b>	National Council for Special Education
<b>NEPS</b>	National Educational Psychological Service
<b>NEWB</b>	National Education Welfare Board
<b>OECD</b>	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
<b>PDST</b>	Professional Development Service for Teachers
<b>PIRLS</b>	Progress in International Reading Literacy Study
<b>PISA</b>	Programme for International Student Assessment
<b>PSMC</b>	Primary School Mathematics Curriculum
<b>SCPA</b>	Scheme for Commissioning Psychological Assessments
<b>SDP</b>	School Development Planning
<b>SEC</b>	State Examinations Commission
<b>SESS</b>	Special Education Support Service
<b>SIG</b>	School Improvement Group
<b>SNA</b>	Special Needs Assistant
<b>SSP</b>	School Support Programme
<b>TALIS</b>	Teaching and Learning in Schools
<b>TIMSS</b>	Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study
<b>TU</b>	Transition Unit
<b>TYP</b>	Transition Year Programme
<b>VEC</b>	Vocational Education Committee
<b>VFM</b>	Value-for-Money
<b>WSE</b>	Whole School Evaluation
<b>WSE-MLL</b>	Whole School Evaluation-Management Leadership and Learning

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### The Irish education system

Ireland has a centralised education system administered by the Department of Education and Skills in the main, but with significant localisation in terms of school ownership, trusteeship and management. The system caters for almost 900,000 students between early years, primary and secondary education.

The Department of Education and Skills is under the direction of a government Minister. The Department is responsible for the overall direction of education, and funds school capitation grants and teachers' salaries as well as ensuring curriculum implementation, compliance with regulations and quality assurance through its Inspectorate. A number of other statutory bodies have devolved responsibilities in other areas, including:

- the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), which is charged with on-going curricular and assessment development;
- the Teaching Council, which now has responsibility for teacher registration and qualification;
- the State Examinations Commission, which runs national formal assessments for secondary students at the end of junior and senior cycles.

The vast majority of primary and secondary schools, although under the aegis of the Department, are owned by or are under the trusteeship of private bodies, usually church authorities or religious orders. An increasing proportion of secondary schools are State owned, and there are initial steps in place to decrease the role of church patronage at primary level also. School management is devolved to local boards of management, with trustee representation, and these boards have responsibility for the development of school policies, staff appointments, property and school financial management.

### Evaluation and Assessment Frameworks

The Irish evaluation and assessment framework has evolved over time, stimulated by significant educational legislation since the 1990s particularly. There are clearly identifiable features within this framework but these do not always form an integrated, cohesive whole. At the time of writing (January 2012) standardised assessment results generated at primary school level had not yet been collected centrally, and thus the information available to policy makers has been limited to periodic sampling assessments. Nor is there reliable evidence of proactive use being made of such assessment data by school authorities themselves. Thus, it remains unclear, as yet, that principals see the potential of data on school performance for informing initiatives to improve teaching and learning. It is vital that this summative data be used in conjunction with assessment for learning practices to promote genuine improvement. The Department's strategy *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life* (2011) seeks to address this challenge through the systematic use of standardised testing in both primary and secondary contexts and greater training for schools in how to best apply and promote improvement from the data so gathered. These changes will begin to take effect in primary schools in 2012 and in secondary schools in 2014.

External evaluation by the Inspectorate is the main form of school assessment and, in addition to school evaluation, currently includes appraisal of probationary teachers at primary level. Increased development of inspection models for primary and secondary schools has been a feature of the past ten years also and a range of subject-specific, programme and whole-school models are now employed. The findings of inspectors' evaluations undoubtedly support the improvement agenda in schools and can facilitate further self-evaluation and development by schools. The publication of school reports since 2006 has meant that parents, students and the general public have access to credible information about a school's performance at a given time. The Inspectorate has also published a range of reports promoting

good practice, as part of its advisory function. Ireland focuses increasing amounts of inspection time on socially disadvantaged schools and on programme provision within schools which are intended to tailor the curriculum to the needs of students at a local level. The Department is currently considering the role to be played by inspection of early years provision generally, and has plans in place for more rigorous monitoring of literacy and numeracy standards across the range of school types.

Two important challenges continually emerge regarding school assessment: the perception that inspection of individual schools cannot happen with sufficient regularity, and the limited degree to which self-evaluation has been embraced in schools. The economic challenges which face Ireland mean that, in common with other public services, the Inspectorate's resources have become more limited. However, the Inspectorate has embarked on major reforms of its inspection models and work practices and these have begun to increase the frequency of inspection from a low base. These new approaches to inspection have allowed the targeting of more intensive inspection models where the risks to learning are greatest and less intensive inspections in a much larger number of schools. Significant improvements in inspection coverage are now being achieved. The Department is convinced, however, that external inspection must be complemented by self-evaluation processes in schools. For this reason, and for many others, the Department is convinced of the need to develop self-evaluation processes in schools and to encourage schools to publish information on the outcomes of such self-evaluation.

In addition to the work of the Inspectorate, the Department of Education and Skills uses Value-for-Money reviews, participation in national and international assessments, data from the State Examinations and outcomes from commissioned research projects to make judgements at system level about education quality. Most of these components of the assessment and evaluation framework have a focus on pupil achievement. Through a range of mechanisms, a clear view of Ireland's standing in the international education arena continues to emerge, most recently from the country's PISA 2009 results. Following on good earlier performance in PISA, these latest results have been disappointing, in mathematics and literacy particularly. The implementation of major new strategy, *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life*, is already under way, and will permeate all aspects of the education system in the coming decade.

Internal school evaluation and teacher appraisal are currently limited, although policy regarding both is evolving. The Department continues to develop links between inspection and self evaluation, and is currently working on self-evaluation instruments for all schools. The Department Inspectorate's publication, *Looking at Our School* (2003), with both primary and secondary versions available, has gone a significant way to supporting school self evaluation. However, more needs to be done as Ireland seeks to align the high degree of autonomy which schools have in terms of policy development and curricular organisation with encouraging schools to adopt more reflective and self-evaluative positions too. Some of the efforts to promote planning and evaluative systems in the past decade have contributed to an over-reliance on paperwork, on schools producing documentation about policies, planning and preparation. The renewed focus today is on action to promote better teaching and learning, on impacting on the educational experience of students and on the quality of their learning outcomes.

Much recent debate has occurred in Ireland about the formal assessment of students, chiefly the State Examination system itself. The core examinations are the Junior Certificate, taken around age 15, and the Leaving Certificate taken two or three years later. There is a growing criticism that the examinations have become the key driving force in the secondary education, in a way which can be detrimental to the curriculum, pedagogical innovation and student experience. Therefore, following some re-examination of senior cycle, the Department received major recommendations from the NCCA in September 2011, proposing the re-shaping of junior cycle and of the Junior Certificate. The broad aim is to see a stronger focus



on developing key skills, student self-direction and active learning. Closely linked to this is a hope that assessment will be moved away significantly from a formal terminal examination, towards a combination of project and portfolio assessment within schools, aided by external moderation by the State Examinations Commission, and some complementary summative examinations. While not strictly relevant to this review, it is pointed out that Ireland has also just initiated a major debate on how access to third level education for students is provided, and one of the emerging themes already relates to a probable over-emphasis on performance in the Leaving Certificate examination also.

### **Teacher and Student Appraisal**

Teacher appraisal at school level is limited in Ireland. There is little evidence of rigorous in-school appraisals of teacher performance, for example by principal teachers, and the role of both in-school and national mentoring systems need to be expanded. Currently, the Department's inspectorate is involved in the appraisal of newly qualified teachers as part of their probationary period in primary schools, but this not occur at secondary level. Assessment of teachers' work forms a core part of general inspections in schools and feedback is given to individual teachers during school inspections. These findings are collated in the formation of judgements about overall school provision, but there is no formal mechanism to allow feedback on individual teacher performance to the principal who, with the school's board of management is ultimately responsible for the quality of educational provision in the school.

However, two significant changes are in train regarding teacher appraisal. Taken together, they represent a significant new emphasis on teacher appraisal in the work of school principals and the Inspectorate. Firstly, in late 2010, new procedures were put in place to enable primary and secondary schools to formally discipline and, if necessary, to dismiss under-performing teachers. These procedures involve both an in-school process led by the principal and an independent review of the teacher's work by the Inspectorate. The first cases were concluding in late January 2012 as this report was written. Secondly, following a decision of the Minister for Education and Skills, the Teaching Council is preparing to establish new common procedures for the induction and probation of teachers at both primary and secondary level. The Council's proposals, which are intended to come into effect in a phased manner from 2012-2014 will require the teaching profession and the principals of schools to assess and approve the work of the new entrant to the teaching profession as a condition of full registration. The Council has cooperated with the Inspectorate in this initiative and it is intended that the Inspectorate will inspect 10% of all new entrants each year and all cases where the newly qualified teacher is experiencing professional difficulties.

The proposed changes to assessment practices delineated in the Government's literacy and numeracy strategy are intended to improve teaching and learning standards at all levels. It is also proposed to illustrate and exemplify what appropriate standards of achievement are, and it is envisaged that sets of exemplars of standards will be made available as part of the implementation of the literacy and numeracy strategy. As there is perceived to be an overload of summative assessment in secondary schools, particularly in the form of written examinations, there is now a need to look more urgently to the development of a national standards framework to support teachers' work in summative assessment.

While the emergent new understandings regarding formative assessment are laudable, it can be argued that there is still an underutilisation of assessment to inform learning in Irish classrooms. The student assessment framework at primary level focuses on the use of assessment at the level of the individual pupil with little or no reference to the use of assessment results at class and whole-school level. There also is limited connection between summative and formative assessment in practice as seen in the infrequent formative use of the results of standardised tests in schools. The challenge for the system is to combine the new understandings of how students learn, together with the existing expertise in relation to

summative assessment. For example, there is a need to strengthen the potential of summative assessment such as those provided in standardised tests to be used formatively in classrooms and indeed at whole-school level. Above all, educators and the general public must move from a view of assessment as an aim, or outcome of education, towards a more holistic appreciation of the potential of assessment and student feedback to support learning, engagement, different learning styles and ultimately, produce better outcomes.

## CHAPTER 1

### THE SCHOOL SYSTEM

Education in Ireland is administered by the Department of Education and Skills (DES). Although the administration of education is largely centralised, a very large number of important decisions are taken locally at the level of the individual school or college.

An unusual characteristic of the Irish educational system is that, although state funded, the majority of schools are owned and managed by private organisations, mainly church authorities or religious orders. In recent years, there has been a growing public-owned sector as many of the new schools that have opened in recent decades are state owned. All schools that are funded by the State are required to operate under the Education Act 1998 and the curriculum, assessment and evaluation framework that has been established by the DES.

Education is compulsory for all children in Ireland from the ages of six to sixteen, or until students have completed three years of secondary education. This period of compulsory education is governed by the Education (Welfare) Act 2000, which provides a means through which issues relating to the educational welfare of children can be addressed effectively. In practice, however, most children commence primary school from four to five years of age. Most students also remain in school beyond the age of sixteen to complete upper secondary education. The national retention rate for the completion of secondary education in 2010 was 87.7%, compared to a retention rate of 81.3% in 2002.(DES, 2011c)

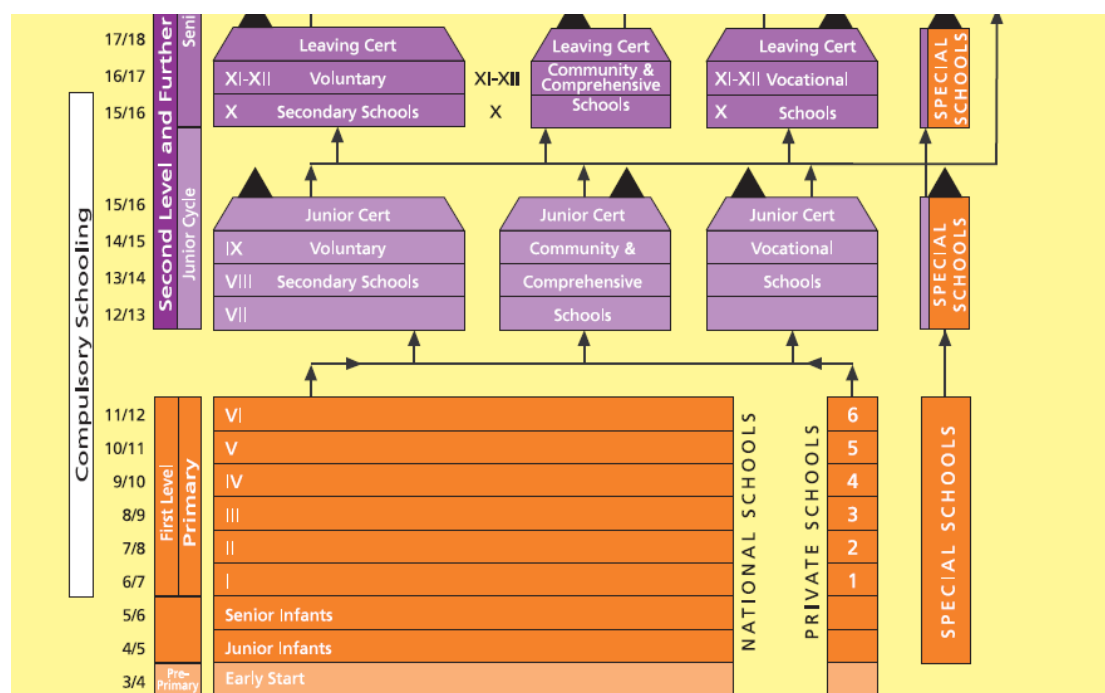


Figure 1.1 Overview of school system

#### 1.1 Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE)

Although this Review on Evaluation and Assessment Frameworks is concerned with the primary and secondary school system in Ireland, it should be noted that Ireland has significant State-funded provision in place for Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) and that a very substantial element of this provision is delivered through the primary school system.

Early childhood care and education is provided both within the school system (generally for children from four to six years who are enrolled in 'infant classes' in primary schools) and, for younger children in a range of non-school based provision, including crèches, nursery

schools/pre-schools. This dual provision has arisen because of the historical development of the sector.

Prior to the late 1990s, State involvement in the provision of early childhood care and education was limited, in the main, to the provision of 'infant education' in primary schools for children between four and six years of age. Since late 1990s, however, a series of policy initiatives have sought to advance the development of high quality provision for children below six years of age. Since 2000, substantial State investment has been provided to develop the infrastructure necessary to deliver on this vision. This investment resulted in the creation of additional ECCE provision (places) outside the primary school system, the development of support agencies and resources, workforce development and the publication of national practice guidelines regarding a curriculum framework and quality assurance.

Since January 2010, a free year of early childhood care and education is available to all children aged between 3 yrs 2 months and 4 yrs 7 months in September of the relevant year. This pre-school provision is funded by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs and is provided by a range of registered private, public and voluntary providers. Over 90% of the 3-4 year old cohort receives free pre-school education in these settings. The vast majority of children then go on to receive two years of ECCE provision in the infant classes in primary schools.

## **1.2 Primary education**

Primary schools cater for children from four years old. Following the infant classes (four to six years old) children progress through a further six years of primary education in classes designated as first class to sixth class, thus completing eight years of primary schooling. Children usually transfer to secondary education at age twelve or thirteen.

There are 3,305 state-funded primary schools in the Republic of Ireland, of which 140 are special schools. In addition, there are 35 independent primary schools. A total of 505,998 pupils attend the state-funded primary schools and are taught by 32,489 teachers. In addition, 8,401 Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) work with pupils with special educational needs in primary schools (Department of Education and Skills, 2011e). Primary schools implement the Primary School Curriculum (NCCA, 1999), the current version of which was introduced in 1999. All state-funded schools are required to teach the curriculum approved by the Minister for Education and Skills.

Primary schools are managed by boards of management under the aegis of a patron who has responsibility for determining the ethos of a school and approving the appointment of all staff. Boards of management of primary schools are expected to manage the school in accordance with procedures that are outlined in the document, *Boards of Management of National Schools: Constitution of Boards and Rules of Procedure 2011* (Department of Education and Science, 2011f). In the denominational schools that constitute the majority of primary schools, the patron is usually the bishop of the religion in question.

Other patron systems also exist. Most multi-denominational primary schools are under the patronage of Educate Together - <http://www.educatetogether.ie/>. Some multi-denominational primary schools have their own independent patron in the form of a company limited by guarantee that is especially established for this purpose. Many schools in English-speaking areas that deliver the curriculum through the medium of the Irish language, known as Gaelscoileanna<sup>1</sup>, are governed by a separate patronage body, An Foras Pátrúnachta na Scoileanna Ián-Ghaeilge <http://www.foras.ie/Index.php?language=en/>. In recent times, a

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<sup>1</sup> Gaelscoileanna may be denominational, multi-denominational or interdenominational.

number of primary schools has also been set up under the auspices of the Vocational Education Committees (VECs)<sup>2</sup> <http://www.vec.ie/> as a further management model.

Although privately owned mainly by various church authorities, most state-funded primary schools are 'public' in that they do not charge fees, they follow the national primary curriculum that is provided by the DES and are funded by the Department. Gaelscoileanna, VEC schools and multi-denominational schools are almost all owned by the state. Teachers in all state-funded primary schools are employed by the schools' boards of management but are paid by the DES.

A very small number of independent primary schools, generally referred to as 'junior schools', are autonomously owned and administered. These schools do not receive financial support from the DES and pay their teachers from the fees paid by the parents of the pupils attending their schools. In general, they offer a broadly similar type of education as state-funded primary schools.

Special schools operate in various parts of the country to educate pupils with intellectual or various physical disabilities; they also have their own boards of management and patrons. The Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act 2004 provides a statutory structure and context within which the education of pupils with special educational needs can be delivered.

### **1.3 Secondary education**

Secondary education comprises two phases; junior cycle and senior cycle over five or six years. About half of secondary schools provide a transition year which is regarded as the first year of senior cycle. Most children transfer to secondary school at the age of 12 or 13. They must be at least 12 years of age on 1 January in the year they commence second-level education in order to be registered in a secondary school. Consequently, Junior Cycle usually comprises students from ages 12-15 years. The age profile of students in Senior Cycle, which includes the optional transition year (between Junior Cycle and Senior Cycle) is 15-18 years. Most students graduate from secondary school at age seventeen or eighteen although a small number may be aged nineteen.

All secondary schools follow the Junior Certificate syllabus at junior cycle and the Leaving Certificate syllabus at senior cycle (see [www.ncca.ie](http://www.ncca.ie) ) The regulations governing curricular and organisational requirements for secondary schools are set out in the *'Rules and Programme for Secondary Schools 2004-2005'*, published by the DES, and updated as required.

The Leaving Certificate is available in three forms:

- the 'Leaving Certificate Established', which is the more academic and traditional version of the programme
- the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme, which introduces vocational subjects and link-modules into the course and the evaluation
- the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA), which aims more at employment options and is not designed as an entry mode to third-level education.

The Leaving Certificate examination is regarded as a high-stakes examination by schools, students and their parents, as the results of the examination determines the choice of course at third level that a student will be offered.

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<sup>2</sup> Vocational Education Committees were established by legislation in 1930 as a local management tier for some state provided secondary schools, and have very recently become responsible for a small number of state-owned primary schools.

In the secondary sector, there are 730 schools comprising several different sectors: voluntary secondary schools, 384; vocational schools, 254; community schools, 78; comprehensive schools, 14. (Table 1.1). These schools cater for 312,159 students (Table 1.2). When students in further education are included (Table 1.3), the number rises to 360,934 students. There are 25,801 (full-time or full-time equivalent) teachers employed in secondary schools (Table 1.1), assisted by approximately 2,142 SNAs.

Type of state-aided educational institutions	Number	Type of school/institution	Number of teachers* paid for from DES funds
Secondary schools	384	Secondary	13,235
Vocational schools	254	Vocational	8,335
Community schools	78	Community	3,563
Comprehensive schools	14	Comprehensive	668
<b>TOTAL:</b>	<b>730</b>	<b>TOTAL:</b>	<b>25,801</b>

\* Full-time or full-time equivalent teachers

**Table 1.1** Types of secondary schools and numbers of teachers 2009-2010 (Department of Education and Skills, 2011a)

Secondary school programmes	Number of full-time students
Junior Cycle	172,648
Senior Cycle	139,511
<b>TOTAL:</b>	<b>312,159</b>

**Table 1.2:** Numbers of secondary school students, 2009-10 (Department of Education and Skills, 2011a)

Further education programmes	Number of full-time students
Post Leaving Certificate Course	38,528
VTOS	5,775
Youthreach	3,452
Senior Traveller Training	1,020
<b>TOTAL:</b>	<b>48,775</b>

**Table 1.3:** Numbers of students in further education programmes 2009-2010 (Department of Education and Skills, 2011a)

### 1.2.1 Ownership and types of secondary schools

Secondary schools may be privately or publicly owned. Voluntary secondary schools are essentially privately owned and run institutions. The other types of secondary schools: vocational schools, community schools and comprehensive schools, are publicly owned. Although secondary schools have different management and governance structures, they all operate in accordance with the regulations and curriculum laid down by the DES.

Voluntary secondary schools are run and owned by various bodies, usually church authorities, although there are several that are independent of denominational management. The majority of these schools are in the 'free-education scheme' whereby the DES effectively funds the schools and no school fees are charged. A minority of such schools are fee-paying including a number of boarding schools. The DES pays the salaries of teaching staff and some other expenses in these schools. Historically, almost all voluntary secondary schools were single-sex, although an increasing number in this sector are now co-educational.

Vocational schools are publicly owned and managed schools and each school belongs, in its area, to a VEC. Each local VEC scheme has its own budget and allocates funds to the schools as well as appointing teachers and principals, under the overall management of a Chief Executive Officer and an Education Officer. Some vocational schools are known as vocational colleges or community colleges, but all come under the same VEC governance system. There are currently thirty-three VECs, one for each county and large urban area; however, there are plans to rationalise the existing thirty three VECs into sixteen Education and Training Boards.

The curriculum provided in vocational schools as regards the junior-cycle syllabus is very similar to that delivered in other sectors- schools at secondary level all have a similar core curriculum- but the options in vocational schools are more likely to be technical and vocational in emphasis. Vocational schools are co-educational.

Comprehensive schools operate under their own boards of management, with various representatives as laid down in legislation, have their own ethos, but are effectively owned by the DES. They also offer a broad curriculum comprising a mix of the secondary and vocational subjects. Like all other secondary schools, the curriculum follows the core curricular programme as set down by the Department. Comprehensive schools are usually co-educational.

Community schools, most of which were set up in the 1970s and 1980s, are either the product of amalgamated schools of various types in a geographical area or are new institutions. Similar in type and governance to comprehensive schools, community schools are co-educational and follow a similar curriculum to other secondary schools. Each community school has its own distinct ethos. These schools are community based and this is reflected in the composition of their boards of management. They are answerable directly to the DES, including matters related to budget and finance.

There is also a growing number of secondary Irish-language-medium schools, known as Gaelcholáistí, some of which come under the patronage of Foras Patrúntachta na Scoileanna lán-Ghaeilge (as described in 1.1).

In addition to the schools above, the DES provides education for students who leave school early. Youthreach comprises alternative centres for education for those who have left mainstream schools or who have failed to engage with schooling and is a central part of the state contribution to achieving a lifelong learning society. Learners in Youthreach are given educational opportunities in a co-educational setting, and the entry age is usually sixteen years. They often follow Further Education and Training Awards Council (i.e. FETAC) courses to Level 3 or Level 4, sometimes take Junior Certificate subjects, but more frequently LCA, and in a small number of cases Leaving Certificate Established courses. The courses are largely modular in nature and the learners receive payment while they participate in their educational courses. Work experience is frequently a feature of Youthreach centres. Some Youthreach centres are governed by boards of management (under the VEC system) whilst others are directly under the management of the officers of the VEC. The programme is also delivered in a network of 45 Community Training Centres funded by FÁS and ten 'Justice Workshops' funded by FÁS ([www.fas.ie](http://www.fas.ie)) in conjunction with the [Department of Justice Equality and Law Reform](#). There are also, at present, Senior Traveller Centres of education ([www.sttc.ie](http://www.sttc.ie)) that provide for an indigenous migrant group. These are currently being developed into community education centres.

### **1.3 Division of Responsibilities**

The overall responsibility for education in Ireland lies with the **Minister for Education and Skills** who is a member of the Irish government and responsible to the national parliament. In practice, the DES together with a number of bodies under its aegis, is responsible for the

running of the education system. The Education Act 1998 and subsequent legislation sets out the parameters and legal framework for the operation of education in the state.

Under the *Public Service Management Act, 1997*, the **Secretary General of the Department** has overall responsibility for managing the Department, implementing and monitoring policy and delivering outputs. The Secretary General provides policy advice to the Minister and the Government and may assign specific powers, duties and functions to other officers in the Department. The Secretary General is also answerable to committees of the national parliament (*Oireachtas*), including the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Skills and the Public Accounts Committee.

The broad functions of the **Department of Education and Skills** relate to policy formulation and review, resource allocation and appropriate monitoring, evaluation of performance and outputs, quality assurance and advice and support to school management and teachers. These functions are in turn reflected in the four high-level objectives as set out in the *Statement of Strategy 2008-2010* (Department of Education and Science, 2008):

- support and improve the quality, relevance and inclusiveness of education for every learner in our schools
- enhance opportunities in further education
- sustain and strengthen higher education and research
- support the delivery and development of education through policy formulation, high-quality planning and a strong customer focus

The system of administration is largely a centralised one with the DES engaged in activities such as payment of teachers' salaries and pensions, grant-aiding school buildings and the school transport system, providing capitation grants for the day-to-day running of schools, approving the curriculum, setting pupil-teacher ratios and the evaluation of schools. Historically, the only regional education structure has been the thirty-three VECs.

In the financial context, occasional changes take place within the annual national budget allocated by government to the DES. These changes can affect pupil-teacher ratios, which govern the size of class and the number of teachers permitted to be employed in a school and paid by the Department. The government can also alter the capitation grant paid to schools based on the number of students registered in that school on 30 September of the previous school year. Employment of teachers and payment of salaries are predicated on those returns and the allocation of teachers to schools by the DES. Teachers' salaries are negotiated either as part of a national pay agreement, or individually with the relevant teachers' unions, and the rates of pay apply nationwide. An agreed national common basic salary scale for teachers applies to all sectors, but payment to individual teachers can be differentiated to a limited extent by length of service and the level of additional responsibility in a school that has been assigned to a teacher.

The DES is not involved in the running or governance of schools. Decisions in relation to matters such as the recruitment of teachers, admissions policies, the secondary school subjects and programmes offered and the budgetary priorities within the school's grant are all determined locally. Boards of management of schools appoint teachers in accordance with agreed procedures, including public advertisement of all vacancies and an interview process to select the most suitable candidate.

The **National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA)**, which operates under the aegis of the Department, has responsibility for the development of curriculum and assessment policy in relation to primary and secondary schools. The NCCA, which is governed by a representative council, a CEO and six curriculum directors, is a statutory body. Most of its syllabus and curricular proposals are generated and debated by a series of large and representative committees, on which the education partners are represented. Their proposals



once passed by their council and approved by the Minister for Education and Skills, are implemented through the education system.

In accordance with Section 13 of the Education Act 1998, **the Inspectorate division of the DES** has responsibility for evaluating and reporting on educational provision in all primary and secondary schools and centres of education<sup>3</sup> that are supported by the Department.

The State Examinations Commission (SEC), established in 2003 as a separate entity but under the DES, has responsibility for running the state examinations for the secondary sector. This at present comprises the Junior Certificate examination and the Leaving Certificate examination.

Various other organisations both within and outside the DES are responsible for different aspects of education. There are for example statutory bodies such as the:

- National Education Welfare Board (NEWB)
- The National Council for Special Education (NCSE)
- The Teaching Council

that have executive functions in the implementation of specific aspects of education legislation.

There are also **support services for the professional development of teachers** such as the:

- Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST)
- Special Education Support Service (SESS)

In addition to the above, the **Educational Research Centre (ERC)**, which is an independent, state-funded research institution, carries out research at all levels of the education system from pre-school to third level on behalf of the DES. This work includes evaluations of initiatives and new programmes, evaluations of services and existing provision in schools, analysis of public examination results, national assessments of educational achievement, international assessments of educational achievement and the development of assessment instruments for use in primary schools.

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<sup>3</sup> A 'centre for education' means a place, other than a school or a place providing university or other third level education, where adult or continuing education or vocational education or training is provided. Examples include a Senior Traveller Training Centre or a Youthreach Centre.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE FRAMEWORK FOR EVALUATION AND ASSESSMENT

#### 2.1 The current approach

The framework for evaluation and assessment in Ireland is not explicitly designed as a whole system but has emerged over time. Understanding of the terms ‘assessment’ and ‘evaluation’ has evolved accordingly. The term ‘assessment’ has a strong association in the Irish context with assessment of students, either by teachers throughout primary and secondary education or in State examinations at two points of secondary education. It refers generally to gathering, interpreting, using and reporting information about a learner’s progress and achievement (NCCA, 2007) and can involve a multiplicity of educational assessment processes within schools. ‘Evaluation’ on the other hand is generally used to refer to appraisal or review of education policy and provision at system level against a set of criteria and taking account of a range of context factors. The term ‘evaluation’ is frequently associated with the work of the Inspectorate of the DES in conducting inspections of the work of schools or centres for education. The main components of the assessment framework are system evaluation, school evaluation, teacher appraisal and student assessment (Figure 2.1).



**Figure 2.1** Overview of evaluation and assessment framework

### *2.1.1 System evaluation*

The education system in Ireland comprises a range of structures and agencies that support the delivery of education to individuals, mainly through public institutions, and implements government policy on education issues. Government policy in relation to education finds expression in national development plans, programmes for government, legislation for education and in a range of publications by the Department of Education and Skills.

The framework for evaluation at system level includes provision for census data collection at system level through completion of an annual statistical return by schools. School management authorities at both primary and secondary level are required to complete an annual statistical return which shows the number of students enrolled, the extent to which students are promoted to the next grade level annually, the deployment of teachers to teaching responsibilities and the rate of completion of primary and secondary levels of education by students. The framework also encompasses information and evidence derived from Inspectorate evaluations, data from state examinations at secondary level, national sampling assessments of students at primary level and research commissioned by the Department of Education and Skills and its agencies.

### *2.1.2 School evaluation*

The framework for school evaluation is underpinned by both school self-evaluation and external evaluation carried out by the Inspectorate of the DES which, in turn, complements the self-evaluation processes. School development planning has been required by legislation since 1998 (Education Act, 1998, Section 21) and has been promoted in national partnership agreements (Sustaining Progress, 2003; Towards 2016, 2006). External evaluation by the Inspectorate has been, in practice, the main form of school evaluation historically. More recently interest in self-evaluation has been growing and the education support services and the Inspectorate actively support it in their work with schools. Nevertheless, robust self-evaluation is not widespread in Irish schools and current government policy (articulated in the Programme for Government 2011-2014 and the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy) have placed an emphasis on requiring effective self-evaluation in schools.

### *2.1.3 Teacher appraisal*

Ireland does not have a formal teacher appraisal system for performance management, accountability or developmental purposes (Shiel et al, 2009). The assessment of teachers' work forms a core part of general inspections in schools and feedback is given to individual teachers during school inspections. These findings are collated in the formation of judgements about overall school provision, but there is no formal mechanism to allow feedback on individual teacher performance to the principal who, with the school's board of management is ultimately responsible for the quality of educational provision in the school. The external appraisal of individual teachers can be undertaken by the inspectorate in reviewing a teacher's competence if requested by a board of management in line with Section 24.3 of the Education Act and Circular 60/2009 (DES, 2009b). Teacher appraisal at school level is limited; there is little evidence of rigorous in-school appraisals of teacher performance, for example by principal teachers.

The role of both in-school and national mentoring systems also needs to be expanded. At primary level, formal procedures are in place for the external appraisal of newly qualified teachers for registration purposes with the Teaching Council. Currently, the Department's inspectorate is involved in the appraisal of these teachers as part of their probationary period in primary schools. However, at secondary level, the external appraisal of newly qualified teachers is not established as a general element of practice; instead, principal teachers sign off on the completion of the probationary period by the teacher.

#### 2.1.4 Student assessment

There is a strong focus in the Irish evaluation and assessment framework on student assessment, underpinned by an evolving legislative and regulatory framework for education. The student assessment framework provides for the use of summative and formative assessment approaches at both levels within which teachers are encouraged to use a range of assessment forms. However, summative assessment has dominated particularly at second level due to the influence of the State Examinations. There is an emergent focus on formative assessment, including Assessment for Learning. The identification of pupils with special educational needs is also a key aspect of the assessment framework for primary and secondary education.

#### 2.1.4 School Autonomy and Accountability with the Framework

A tension between school autonomy and accountability is evident in the overall profile and design of the evaluation and assessment framework. On the one hand, the Education Act 1998 and curriculum documents give schools a degree of autonomy and flexibility with regard to how they organise the provision of education. Section 9 of the Education Act states that:

*a recognised school shall provide education to students, which is appropriate to their abilities and needs.*

In addition, the Primary School Curriculum provides schools with a degree of flexibility in terms of how they implement the curriculum:

*Within the framework of the curriculum, schools are afforded flexibility to plan a programme that is appropriate to the individual school's circumstances and to the needs, aptitudes and interests of the children. In the presentation of content and in the exploration of approaches and methodologies, the curriculum assumes that schools, in the process of planning its implementation, will adapt and interpret the curriculum where necessary to meet their own unique requirements. (NCCA, 1999, p11)*

At secondary level, different programmes have been introduced that allow schools to meet a range of learning needs.

Curriculum documents and guidelines at primary and secondary level give schools considerable flexibility in relation to the assessment of their pupils' learning. Schools and teachers are encouraged to use a range of assessment approaches ranging from those that can be pupil-led (for example, self assessment and conferencing) to those that are teacher led (for example, teacher observation, teacher-designed tests and tasks, and standardised tests).

On the other hand, there has been a drive for greater accountability in recent years which has attached a greater importance to particular evaluation, assessment and reporting approaches. Examples of this move towards accountability include the introduction of regular whole-school inspection to secondary schools in 2003, the publication of school inspection reports in 2006, and the introduction of mandatory standardised testing in primary schools in 2007. The National Strategy for Literacy and Numeracy (DES, 2011b) outlines additional accountability measures such as the development of national standards of students' achievement and the collection of national data on student achievement. The strategy also requires schools to provide parents with adequate, meaningful and clear assessment information on their child's progress.

#### 2.1.5 The distribution of responsibilities within the framework

The Education Act 1998 clarifies responsibilities with regard to evaluation and assessment in the educational system. In accordance with Section 7 (2) (b), the overarching responsibility rests with the Minister for Education and Skills:

*It shall be a function of the Minister...to monitor and assess the quality, economy, efficiency and effectiveness of the education system provided in the State by recognised schools and centres for education .....and to publish, in such manner as the Minister considers appropriate, information relating to such monitoring and assessment.*

On behalf of the Minister, the DES co-ordinates and develops policy and decisions relating to the monitoring and assessment of the education system taking into account advice from the NCCA which, in accordance with Section 41(2(d)) of the Education Act, has a key advisory role in developing mechanisms for assessing standards of knowledge and skills.

In accordance with Section 13 of the Education Act, the Inspectorate is the key agency in evaluating the education system and in conducting school evaluation and appraisal of teachers. The Inspectorate contributes regularly to system evaluation by undertaking evaluation of educational programmes designed to meet particular needs, by participating in Value-for-Money (VFM) reviews or by assessing policy implementation and impact.

Whilst there are no formal procedures in place for the regular monitoring of qualified teachers, Section 24 of the Education Act allows a board of management to suspend or dismiss teachers and staff in accordance with official procedures. In such instances, the board must request the Inspectorate to undertake a review of an individual teacher's competence prior to disciplining or dismissing a teacher.

As noted earlier in this chapter, principals and teachers have the main responsibility for student assessment. In accordance with Section 22(2) (b) of the Education Act, principals and teachers are required:

*to regularly evaluate students and periodically report the results of the evaluation to the students and their parents.*

From 2012, principal teachers are obliged to report the results of standardised tests in English and mathematics each year to their boards of management. The standardised tests are administered at three grade levels in primary schools and at one grade level in secondary schools. Teachers will also report each child's results to their parents. Schools are required to submit aggregated results of the standardised tests to the Department of Education and Skills.

The DES has devolved elements of student evaluation and assessment to national bodies or external agencies. The State examinations are co-ordinated and managed by the SEC, a statutory independent agency. The national sampling assessment of students is carried out by the ERC which is an independent research agency. The ERC also co-ordinates participation in international assessments on behalf of the Department. The DES may also commission research through public procurement as part of VFM reviews and to inform particular aspects of policy.

## **2.2 Context**

Historically, the focus of evaluation in the school system has been on student assessment through state examinations both at primary and secondary level. The main aim of such testing was to create a standardised method of assessment leading to the award of certificates at significant educational milestones. This testing included the Primary Certificate examination at the end of primary school until its removal in 1967, the Intermediate (now Junior) Certificate examinations at the end of three years of secondary education and the Leaving Certificate examination at the end of secondary education. While the abolition of the Primary Certificate examination gave greater freedom to primary schools in relation to the implementation of the curriculum, summative approaches to assessment continued to dominate until the introduction of the current primary curriculum in 1999. Summative

approaches due to the State Examinations continue to have a powerful influence on the learning experiences of students at secondary level.

Developments elsewhere have had a key influence on the evolution of the evaluation and assessment framework in Ireland. National assessments in English reading were introduced to primary schools in 1972 as a result of public debate about standards in the subject following the relatively poor performance of Irish pupils compared to that of pupils in England and Wales and some concern about the impact of the newly introduced 1971 child-centred curriculum on standards. Later on in the eighties and nineties, the development of new public management systems in the European Union heightened awareness of the need for accountability and the need to engage in evaluation that was more systematic (McNamara et al, 2008). Such thinking is clearly reflected in the rationale that underpins the introduction of the pilot of the whole-school evaluation model of inspection in schools which refers to the assessment and evaluation of schools across the European Union:

*In recent years, a number of countries have moved towards some form of system evaluation in addition to the more traditional inspection of classroom learning and teaching.....In tandem with the growth of system evaluation, there is a growing awareness of the need to adopt a more professional and scientific approach to the evaluation of learning and teaching outcomes.....In a number of countries, the focus is now on the evaluation of particular aspects of schools' functioning each year, linked to internal analysis and self-evaluation by the schools.....While in the past, many countries' systems of school evaluation were primarily either internal to the school or externally administered, there is now a growing tendency across Europe to see external and internal school evaluation processes as being inextricably linked - a tendency which is also evident in this country. There is an increasing effort to encourage schools to review their own progress in a formal way and on a regular basis and, especially, to identify strengths and areas of further development, with a view to enhancing their developmental planning...*

(Department of Education and Science, 1999, p 5-6)

Internal factors, often conflicting, have also influenced the manner in which evaluation and assessment has evolved. On the one hand, factors such as the social partnership approach to industrial relations and resistance from teachers due to the negative reports of school evaluation in other systems have tended to slow the pace of change. The impact of these factors is seen in the lengthy process of consultation that was involved in the introduction of whole-school evaluation as a new model of inspection from initial piloting in 1996 to widespread implementation in 2004. On the other hand, factors such as an increased interest in value for money and demands for accountability in the public sector have tended to drive change. For example, public interest in getting more information about school performance lead to the introduction of published school inspection reports in February 2006.

A key concern which differentiates Ireland from other OECD countries has been a policy to avoid the publication of statistical information about individual school performance in examinations which would lead to the development of comparative or league tables. In accordance with Section 21 of the Freedom of Information Act 1997, any information relating to statistical information that might have informed inspectors' judgements as outlined in reports cannot be released to third parties if it can reasonably be expected to:

*prejudice the effectiveness of tests, examinations, investigations, inquiries or audits conducted by or on behalf of the public body concerned or the procedures or methods for the conduct thereof.*

Section 53 of the Education Act 1998 stipulates that the Minister of Education and Skills may:

*refuse access to any information which would enable the compilation of information (that is not otherwise available to the general public) in relation to the comparative performance of schools in respect of the academic achievement of students enrolled...*

In line with this, inspectors' reports do not include any numerical student test or examination data that could be used in the compilation of comparative tables though inspectors have access to all of this data and draw upon it when forming their judgements about the effectiveness of learning in the school. The reports draw upon this evidence as well as evidence from observations of teaching and learning in classrooms, the review of school and Department documentation and questionnaire data from parents and students to provide a balanced and fair assessment of the work of schools.

In recent years, the value for money imperative has been a fundamental part of public service modernisation in Ireland and this has given an additional importance to evaluation and assessment in the educational context. With challenging economic circumstances, the emphasis is on achieving greater efficiency from the expenditure base. Effective monitoring, appraisal and evaluation has been regarded as critical for delivering on this objective with a focus on the delivery of outputs and the achievement of goals/objectives. This is reflected in the DES' Strategy Statement (Department of Education and Skills, 2008) which sets out a range of goals and objectives, and associated outcomes and outputs. VFM is also a clear part of the rationale underpinning the National Literacy and Numeracy Plan and the actions that have been identified to implement this plan:

*We are embarking on this literacy and numeracy strategy at a time when our economic circumstances are extremely difficult. We know that additional resources will simply not be available to us as we seek to bring about very significant change. However, making sure that every child and young person gets the opportunity to acquire literacy and numeracy skills is simply too important for us not to act now. In fact, making sure that our children and young people have world-class literacy and numeracy skills will be essential for the rebuilding of our economic prosperity and ensuring the well-being of our society.*

*This means that difficult choices have to be made. We will have to ensure the most efficient use possible of available resources and in many instances re-prioritise spending away from desirable but ultimately less important activities to enable us to improve the literacy and numeracy skills of the children and young people in our care*

(Department of Education and Skills, 2011b)

## **2.3 Initiatives and Implementation**

Rather than any single initiative to support the implementation of the evaluation and assessment framework as an overarching entity, different initiatives have been put in place on a needs basis to support the development of the different components of the framework. While some of these will have at times spilled over to influence elements of the other components, the overall implementation of the framework has occurred on an incremental basis.

### *2.3.1 Recent initiatives in student assessment*

The student assessment component has developed in tandem with initiatives in curriculum development.

At primary level, these developments have stemmed from evaluations and reviews of curriculum implementation that were carried out by the Inspectorate (for example, Inspectorate, Department of Education and Science, 2005c) and the NCCA (NCCA, 2005a; NCCA, 2010a). A key finding from these evaluations has been the limited use of assessment for formative purposes, despite various interventions and support in this area. In particular, Inspectorate evaluations have highlighted a lack of focus on the outcomes of learning and on

the appropriate use of assessment modes to assess pupils' mastery of those outcomes. System response to these findings has included the introduction of mandatory standardised testing in English and mathematics at two points of the primary school cycle, the provision of guidelines on assessment, the development of AfL materials by the NCCA and the limited provision of professional development to teachers on standardised testing.

Nonetheless, student assessment in terms of its function and implementation remains an issue in primary schools. Whole-school evaluation reports by inspectors and the 2009 National Assessments survey (Eivers et al, 2010) indicate that there is still significant scope for development in terms of the formative use of student assessment not only to improve the learning of individual pupils in the classroom but to promote improvement at whole-school level. These concerns have been instrumental in informing the new emphasises placed on evaluation and assessment in the government's National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy (2011).

Throughout the secondary system, constant renewal and modernisation in relation to curriculum and assessment is taking place at both the junior and senior cycles in response to concerns about the relevance of the programmes and the effectiveness of the assessment modes. For example, the fitness for purpose of the Junior Certificate examination has been greatly called into question in research that has been recently carried out by the ESRI (Smyth, 2009). In particular, there is concern about 'rote learning', 'teaching to the test' and curriculum overload. The policy priorities are to make programmes more relevant, introduce new modes of assessment, while keeping the quality of assessment and evaluation that has been achieved over many years through the State examinations.

Proposals to change syllabus content at either junior or senior cycle inevitably lead to renewal of the assessment debate. Reviews of several syllabuses have prompted an active debate on the assessment modes that should or can form the specification for the assessment of those subjects. Strong views are held by various stakeholders on best practice and the most effective way forward. These debates have focused on assessment modes such as oral and aural examinations in languages, practical examinations in the science and technology subjects, fieldwork and research work in the areas of history and geography, and projects and course work in other subjects. Many of these have been progressed while others are at an early stage of development and implementation.

Following a request from the Minister for Education and Skills, the NCCA has undertaken a fundamental review of the junior cycle curriculum with a view to revising the programme content and modes of assessment at junior cycle. The proposals for assessment (NCCA, 2011) represent a radical shift from the current assessment approach by way of a summative, external examination by the SEC at the end of the junior cycle to 40% school-based assessment with a substantially reduced final assessment by the SEC.

The initiatives described above are not without their critics or their difficulties, but attempt to show new ways forward that can enhance the educational and assessment process. The successful implementation of these initiatives also faces considerable challenges, given the prevailing influence of the Leaving Certificate Examination as a high-stakes summative assessment of a student's learning on leaving secondary school and its role in determining entry to third-level institutions.

### *2.3.2 Recent initiatives in teacher assessment*

Two significant changes are in train regarding teacher appraisal. Taken together, they represent a significant new emphasis on teacher appraisal in the work of school principals and the Inspectorate. Firstly, in late 2010, new procedures were put in place to enable primary and secondary schools to formally discipline and, if necessary, to dismiss under-performing teachers. These procedures involve both an in-school process led by the principal and an



independent review of the teacher's work by the Inspectorate. The first cases were concluding in late January 2012 as this report was written. Secondly, following a decision of the Minister for Education and Skills, the Teaching Council is preparing to establish new common procedures for the induction and probation of teachers at both primary and secondary level. The Council's proposals, which are intended to come into effect in a phased manner from 2012-2014 will require the teaching profession and the principals of schools to assess and approve the work of the new entrant to the teaching profession as a condition of full registration. The Council has cooperated with the Inspectorate in this initiative and it is intended that the Inspectorate will inspect 10% of all new entrants each year and all cases where the newly qualified teacher is experiencing professional difficulties.

### *2.3.3 Recent initiatives in school evaluation and system evaluation*

A comprehensive system of school inspection, which involves the use of a range of models of school evaluation, is being developed. Meanwhile, there is an increasing awareness of the need to link the external evaluation of schools more effectively with improved school self-evaluation. This is reflected in procedures that are now in place to follow up on inspections, an emerging focus on self-evaluation as part of the inspection process and the recent communication, through the Literacy and Numeracy strategy and the Programme for Government, of expectations at system level regarding the implementation of self-evaluation processes in schools.

Policy initiatives in system evaluation have mainly focused on generating greater accountability in schools and ensuring improvement through linkage of evaluation with intended targets. This is seen in the evaluation of the DEIS Action Plan (Department of Education and Skills, 2005a) which not only monitors the implementation of the programmes but assesses the impact of initiatives on pupils' achievement. It is also reflected in National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy (Department of Education and Skills, 2011b) which identifies a range of measures to drive more effective generation and use of assessment evidence in schools and in the educational system.

There is emerging evidence that the current arrangements for system evaluation have been effective in relation to informing aspects of policy development and resource allocation, improving student participation and to a lesser extent in improving student achievement. The development of the DEIS Action Plan was responsive to the findings of surveys in disadvantaged schools and other evaluations such as those of the Inspectorate. The extent to which system evaluation has led to improved educational achievement is not yet fully established, but reports of evaluations of DEIS schools by the Inspectorate suggest that tangible evidence of improvement is emerging. Indeed, it is interesting to note that recent follow-up evaluations by both the Inspectorate and the Educational Research Centre have shown that the actions taken under this policy to combat educational disadvantage have been at least partially successful in raising significantly the achievement levels of pupils in reading and mathematics at primary level.

### *2.3.4 The involvement of stakeholders*

Involvement of stakeholders in policy development has been a prominent feature of the education system generally since the early 1990s. The development of assessment and evaluation policy formulation has followed this broader approach. A range of well-established frameworks promotes dialogue and common action amongst the main stakeholders. The various committees that advise the assessment proposals of the NCCA and the national assessments of the ERC comprise members of relevant organisations and bodies including the DES, school management groups, teacher unions, and parents' groups.

Most recently, the National Strategy for Literacy and Numeracy (2011) has been shaped by an intensive public consultation. In response to its invitation to the education system and the public for comments on the draft literacy and numeracy strategy, the DES received almost 480 written submissions most of which are available on the DES website. A joint National Council for Curriculum and Assessment and Higher Education Authority conference on the transition from secondary school to higher education took place in September 2011. The conference focused on the interface between second and third level education, the readiness of those leaving second level for third level and the effects of the current 'points' for entry to higher education on both systems. The purpose of the conference, which promoted dialogue across the main stakeholders, was to interrogate current processes, consider possible options and gauge the consensus across both sectors for developing current practice.

The different stakeholders in the educational sector would appear to be broadly supportive of the evaluation framework at system level especially as the framework has evolved in recent years through a process of consensus and negotiation and in partnership with key stakeholders. Such a partnership approach is evident in advisory and technical committees that are involved in the development and review of the national assessments in literacy and numeracy. Each of the relevant organisations (Department of Education and Skills, school management groups, teacher unions, and parents' groups) are represented on these committees. Nevertheless, it should be noted that criticisms have been made of the way in which consultation and consensus building have slowed down the development of policy and the implementation of radical change. These criticisms have been voiced most recently in the *Third Report of the Organisational Review Programme (ORP)* of the Department of Education and Skills (2012).

### *2.3.5 Implementing evaluation and assessment strategies*

Pilot projects are usually developed before wide-scale implementation. This is reflected in the current school self-evaluation pilot project been undertaken by a sample of twelve primary schools in conjunction with the DES. Similarly, the Project Maths initiative for second level schools began in September 2008, with an initial group of 24 schools. Project Maths involves the introduction of revised syllabuses for both Junior and Leaving Certificate Mathematics. It involves changes to what students learn in mathematics, how they learn it and how they will be assessed. The pilot project helps the NCCA to learn from schools how the proposed revisions to the syllabus work in classrooms and will lead to the development of teaching and learning resources and assessment instruments.

### *2.3.6 Policy priorities in the area of evaluation and assessment*

Policy priorities in the area of evaluation and assessment include the engagement of schools in robust school self-evaluation, the greater use of student assessment data to support teaching and learning, and improvements in the availability of national assessment data on literacy and numeracy achievement. These are all outlined in the National Strategy for Literacy and Numeracy (2011). In addition, as mentioned earlier, the NCCA is currently undertaking a reform of the Junior Cycle programme which will result in significant changes in the way Junior Cycle students are taught and assessed in second level schools.

## **2.4 Conclusion**

The evaluation and assessment framework has emerged in an incremental fashion through a process of consensus and negotiation and in response to external and internal factors. While four components are identifiable and in turn constitute a number of elements, the evaluation and assessment framework does not constitute an integrated, cohesive whole. As Figure 2.1 shows, there is little or no connection between the different assessment components. Until the publication of the National Strategy for Literacy and Numeracy, there was no system in place

to ensure that the various elements of the evaluation and assessment framework reinforce each other. For example, standardised assessment results generated at school level were not collected centrally, and thus the information available to policy makers was limited to periodic sampling assessments. As outlined above, schools are required to submit their aggregated standardised test data to the DES from 2012 and this should greatly enhance the availability of national assessment data on literacy and numeracy achievement. Of ongoing concern has been the fact that primary schools themselves do not appear to use the data they generate as the basis for self evaluation and school improvement or as a baseline against which school improvement could be measured. To address this, the National Strategy for Literacy and Numeracy outlines comprehensive actions to support school leaders in implementing robust school self-evaluation from 2011 onwards.

Student assessment predominates and is supported by legislative, regulatory and curricular requirements. External evaluation by the Inspectorate is the main form of school evaluation and appraisal of probationary teachers at primary level. Internal school evaluation and teacher appraisal are limited, both in the policy framework and in practice, although policy regarding both is evolving.

Thus, a number of key points for further development emerge:

- the need for a balance between external and internal evaluation, particularly the development of self-evaluation processes and teacher appraisal procedures in schools
- the need for greater integration within and between the different components of the evaluation and assessment framework
- the need to develop accountability procedures between schools and parents, and schools and the system including the development of a standards framework for schools
- better alignment between assessment systems and the learning outcomes in the curriculum.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **SYSTEM EVALUATION**

#### ***3.1 Current practices***

##### ***3.1.1 Overall framework for system evaluation***

The framework for system evaluation represents a matrix of information derived from a compilation of school census data, Inspectorate evaluations, data from state examinations at secondary level, national sampling assessments of students at primary level and research commissioned by the Department of Education and Skills and its agencies. The different components of the system evaluation framework assist the Department with assessing the extent to which it is fulfilling its broad functions - policy formulation and review, resource allocation and monitoring, evaluation of performance and outputs, quality assurance, and advice and support to school management and teachers- with a view to promoting the overall improvement of the educational system.

The broad approach to evaluating the school system as a whole is based on assessing the aggregated impact on a multi-annual basis of outputs from State funding as identified in the DES' Strategy Statement (Department of Education and Science, 2008) and its Annual Output Statement (Department of Education and Skills, 2010a). This aggregated impact is captured from time to time through a variety of outcome measures such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) studies and Inspectorate composite reports on specific aspects of teaching and learning (Inspectorate, 2011b). It is also gleaned from research and evaluation conducted on the impact of programmes such as the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) plan for educational inclusion (Inspectorate, 2011c, 2011d; Weir et al. 2011).

The Department's biennial Strategy Statement sets out the key objectives and related strategies of the Department over the following two-year period. It is drawn up in the context of Government policy, the Department's mission statement and within the framework of available resources. The focus of the Statement of Strategy is on high-levels goals, objectives and outputs rather than specific detail on actions to be undertaken and reflects the government's commitment to promote specific education policies and priority areas for expenditure. For example, the Department targets in the Statement of Strategy 2008-2010 are set out under four high level objectives as:

- Support and improve the quality, relevance and inclusiveness of education for every learner in our schools<sup>1</sup>;
- Enhance opportunities in further education<sup>2</sup>;
- Sustain and strengthen higher education and research;
- Support the delivery and development of education through policy formulation, high-quality planning and a strong customer focus.

In the past, evidence of outputs was provided in annual statements of output to the Select Committee on education in the national parliament. However, recent reforms have placed an emphasis on a performance budgeting approach in the formulation of the budgets of all government department including the Department of Education and Skills. This approach is intended to place a focus on the improved educational outcomes obtained for students by means of each of the expenditure items in the Department's budget. To date, such reviews of the aggregated impact of initiatives and spending have drawn from a whole range of data generated by sources such as Inspectorate evaluations, national sampling assessments of students at primary level, State examinations at secondary level, international student assessments such as PISA, reports on pupil attendance and participation, and participation in

peer review of aspects of the education system by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the Council of Europe. These have been supplemented by occasional national reviews of policy and ad-hoc evaluations and reports that are commissioned by the DES on specific elements of educational provision. The emphasis on the measurement of learning and other outcomes achieved is likely to become even more important in the Irish system as public service reform and associated improved budgetary policy are implemented.

Evaluation at system level is also informed by annual or periodic reports of agencies of the Department of Education and Skills that are primarily involved in front-line service delivery. These would include annual reports of the State Examinations Commission (available at <http://www.examinations.ie/index.php?l=en&mc=au&sc=pb>); and reports by Chief Examiners on achievement in subjects in public examination provide insights into trends in achievement across a wide range of subjects taught in second levels schools. This is commissioned research by the Department and its agencies, and synthesis reports by the Inspectorate also form a significant part of the evidence base for system evaluation.

Objectives of system improvement and accountability in relation to the schooling system are achieved through the publication of the Department's strategy statement on a three-year basis and its annual output statement. They are also achieved through the publication and dissemination of a range of other reports including inspectors' system evaluation reports (thematic and composite), reports of national assessments, international studies and the consequential use of the findings of these reports to inform policy development and resource provision in schools.

The DES has overarching responsibility for system evaluation, with particular responsibility allocated to sections within the Department, namely the Inspectorate and the Central Policy Unit. Responsibility for implementing the different components of the evaluation system is also allocated to bodies external to the Department such as the SEC and the National Educational Welfare Board, and independent research groups that the Department commissions to perform particular aspects.

### *3.1.2 Evaluation framework at primary and secondary levels*

The evaluation framework for primary and secondary education comprises a range of strands, many of which are common to both sectors. However, some strands are sector specific such as the administration of national assessments in English reading and mathematics at primary level (Table 3.1) and the administration of State examinations in secondary schools.

Strands of the evaluation framework that are common to both primary and secondary include thematic and composite evaluations of different aspects of the system by the Department's Inspectorate, commissioned evaluations of various aspects of educational provision, and evaluation of the impact of DEIS, the Department's educational inclusion action plan. They also include VFM reviews of programmes funded by the Department in accordance with the Government's Value for Money and Policy Review Initiative. To date, these VFM reviews have included reviews of (Information and Communication Technologies) ICT support services for schools, programmes managed by Teacher Education Section, and Youthreach and Senior Traveller Training Centre programmes.

Participation in international assessments has also been a feature of system evaluation of primary and secondary schooling although more regularly at secondary level than primary. Ireland has consistently participated in the PISA assessments which have assessed the performance of a representative sample of Irish 15-year olds in reading, mathematics and science. Prior to 2011, the only international study that Irish primary pupils participated in was the 1995 Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and the IEA Reading Literacy Survey in 1991. Irish pupils, in the sixth year of primary school (9-10 years

old), participated in both the TIMSS and Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) surveys during 2011.

There are many examples of the DES contracting external research groups or agencies to carry out evaluations of particular aspects of educational provision. For example, researchers (Harris et al, 2006) were commissioned to carry out an examination of long-term trends in achievement in Irish among sixth class pupils in primary schools which compared the achievement of pupils in 2002 with that of a similar cohort of pupils from 1985. More recently, an independent consultancy firm was engaged to undertake an evaluation of the implementation of the Schools Broadband Programme (Department of Education, 2009a). In 2010, the Educational Research Centre (Shiel et al., 2011) was commissioned to establish the English reading and mathematics standards of Second and Sixth class pupils in Irish-medium schools, and compare these with overall national standards.

### *3.1.3 Procedures used in system evaluation*

The Department adopts a range of approaches to evaluating the school system. As outlined above, these include analysis of data and reports derived from a range of sources including Inspectorate evaluations, national sampling assessments of students at primary level and State examinations at secondary level. In addition, international secondary student assessments, statistics on student attendance and participation at all levels are important components of the knowledge base. These sources are supplemented by occasional national reviews of policy and ad-hoc evaluations and reports that are commissioned on specific elements of educational provision.

Significant emphasis is placed on short-term and long-term trend data. For example, ongoing analysis of statistics from the State examinations provides valuable trend information on the grades achieved by students in different subjects, the course levels at which those grades were achieved and the numbers who passed or failed those examinations.

Aspects that are the subject of system evaluation frequently include student performance in terms of their knowledge and skills. The national assessments in reading at primary level, for example, provide information on pupils' performance in relation to comprehension processes such as retrieving information, making inferences, interpreting and integrating ideas and information, and evaluating content. The national assessments in mathematics test pupils' knowledge of the content areas of the Primary School Curriculum (NCCA, 1999) in the context of the main process skills- understanding and recalling, implementing procedures, integrating and connecting, reasoning and problem-solving. The State examinations at secondary level reflect the knowledge and skills framework that underpins the various course syllabuses.

### *3.1.4 Inspectorate evaluations*

The Inspectorate uses two main evaluative and reporting approaches that directly feed into system evaluation- thematic and composite evaluative activity. Thematic evaluations are specialist evaluation projects with a research focus that examine the quality of selected educational programmes or services in a sample of schools. The approaches involved include first-hand observation of teaching and learning, analysis of documents and work samples, and the use of structured interviews, focused seminars and questionnaires. To date, these have focused on the quality of provision in a range of curricular areas in primary schools and other aspects of educational provision; for example, on the effectiveness of whole-school planning at primary level (Inspectorate, Department of Education and Skills, 2006c), the use of ICT at primary and secondary levels (Inspectorate, Department of Education and Skills, 2008) and most recently the implementation of the Department's action programme on combating educational disadvantage, DEIS, (2012).

Composite reports produced by the Inspectorate are based on an analysis of subject inspections at secondary level or other inspection data. To date, composite reports based on subject inspections have included English, geography, history, home economics, Irish at junior cycle, materials technology (wood), construction studies, music, science at junior cycle, and guidance. See [www.education.ie](http://www.education.ie). The outcomes of inspections of probationary teachers in primary schools and the inspections of student teachers on teaching practice in colleges of education have also informed the content of composite reports (Inspectorate, Department of Education and Skills, 2005d). These reports provide advice and support for teachers, schools and teacher educators, and identify trends and issues of relevance to policy makers.

### 3.1.5 National assessments

National assessments involve the administration of tests in English reading and mathematics especially designed for this purpose by the ERC. They were first undertaken in 1972 and have been conducted regularly at various class levels since. The main functions of the National Assessments are to assess national standards, identify factors related to performance on the tests, and inform policy. The most recent National Assessment of Mathematics involved the assessment of pupils' mathematics achievement in Second and Sixth classes. Prior to this, national assessments were carried out at various class levels. The 2009 assessment involved extending and modifying the earlier framework to include test specifications that cover the Primary School Mathematics Curriculum (PSMC) for Second and Sixth classes (DES/NCCA 1999). It is intended that future National Assessments will target these two classes in order to monitor changes over time. As well as assessing reading achievement, national assessments gather contextual information about pupils, their homes and the schools in which they are enrolled through the completion of questionnaires by principals, teachers, pupils and parents.

Year	Domain	Target group	Approx. No pupils	Report
1972	English reading	10-year olds	4,500	Unpublished
1977	Mathematics	2 <sup>nd</sup> & 4 <sup>th</sup> classes	4,000	Department of Education (1980)
1979	Mathematics	6 <sup>th</sup> class	2,000	Department of Education (1980)
1980	English reading	4 <sup>th</sup> & 5 <sup>th</sup> classes	2,400	Department of Education (1982)
1984	Mathematics	6 <sup>th</sup> class	2,400	Department of Education (1985)
1988	English reading	5 <sup>th</sup> class	2,200	Department of Education (1991)
1993	English reading	5 <sup>th</sup> class & 11 year olds	4,000	Unpublished ERC (1995)
1998	English reading	5 <sup>th</sup> class	4,000	Cosgrove et al. (2000)
1999	Mathematics	4 <sup>th</sup> class	5,000	Shiel & Kelly (2001)
2004	Mathematics	4 <sup>th</sup> class	4,000	Shiel et al (2006)
2004	English reading	1 <sup>st</sup> and 5 <sup>th</sup> class	8,000	Eivers et al (2005)
2009	English reading Mathematics	2 <sup>nd</sup> and 6 <sup>th</sup> class	8,000	Eivers et al (2010)
2010	English reading and Mathematics	2 <sup>nd</sup> and 6 <sup>th</sup> class Irish medium schools	N/A	Fieldwork completed

**Table 3.1** Irish national assessments of reading and/or mathematics at primary level

### *3.1.6 The State Examinations Commission*

No discussion of assessment in education in Ireland would be complete without reference to the long tradition in Ireland of external assessment. External examinations have been a feature of Irish education at all levels over many years and until relatively recently were organised and administered directly by the Department of Education and Skills, with the Inspectorate having a central role. In 1997, the State Examinations Commission (SEC) was established.

The SEC, a non-departmental public body under the aegis of the Department, now has responsibility for the development, assessment, accreditation and certification of secondary examinations. It also provides statistics on the participation and achievement of students in the State examinations. Students in secondary schools sit the Junior and Leaving Certificate examinations, which take place early in June each year. Typically 60,000 students take each of these examinations each year and students sit an average of 10 subject for the Junior Certificate examination while Leaving Certificate students sit 7 or 8 subjects, in the main. Results of the Leaving Certificate are reported in August and are used in allocating places to students in third-level education.

### *3.1.7 External studies*

The external studies that the DES has commissioned involve a range of research approaches in accordance with the type of study in question. The examination of long-term trends in achievement in Irish (Harris et al, 2006) used three objective tests to measure Irish listening, Irish speaking and Irish reading in three populations of schools- English medium schools, Irish medium schools in English speaking areas and schools in Irish speaking areas known as the Gaeltacht. It also involved the collection of background linguistic, social and educational data from parents, teachers and pupils and analysed relationships between key social, linguistic and educational variables and achievement in listening, speaking and reading Irish. As part of the evaluation of the implementation of the Schools Broadband Programme (Department of Education and Skills, 2009a), a survey using face-to-face interviews was conducted across a representative sample of schools, both primary and secondary, and across all technologies. The study was further informed through data collected from key actors in the schools broadband programme and from an analysis of technical data available from the parties responsible for the procurement, provisioning, operations and maintenance of the services.

### *3.1.8 Indicators*

A number of indicators are used as evidence to determine whether the Irish schooling system is providing successfully for learners (Department of Education and Science, 2008). These mainly relate to education levels in the general population, student participation in the different levels of educational provision and student achievement as follows:

- *Education levels in the general population*
  - Proportion of 18-24 year olds with at most lower secondary educational attainment and not in further education or training
  - Proportion of 20-24 year olds who have completed upper secondary education
  - Literacy levels in the adult population
  
- *Participation in the different levels of educational provision*
  - % of children attending infant classes in primary schools and ECCE provision
  - Retention rates at secondary level
  - Progression to higher education
  - Number of participants on youth schemes



- *Student achievement*
  - Results of national assessments (using sampling) of literacy, mathematics, science and ICT attainment of primary school students at both second and sixth class.
  - Survey-based achievement levels for fourth class primary school students in international studies of achievement: PIRLS and TIMSS
  - Survey-based achievement levels for secondary school students (including percentage of 15-year-olds with Reading Literacy proficiency of PISA level 1)
  
- *Retention rates*
  - Frequently used benchmarks among these include the proportion of students that complete upper secondary level education (or equivalent), retention rates, the learning achievements of Irish secondary students relative to their counterparts in other countries and the results of national assessments in literacy and mathematics at primary level. Similar indicators are used to evaluate the effectiveness of the DEIS programme, that is attendance, performance in numeracy and literacy and drop-out rates.

Many of the above indices are measured annually but others are measured less frequently as they are part of international benchmarking exercises that are carried out by organisations such as the OECD.

### *3.1.9 Competencies to evaluate the school system and to use evaluation results*

The competencies and structures to facilitate evaluation of the system have emerged in the context of an evolving legislative framework which has clarified procedures with regard to assessment and reporting in schools as well as the responsibilities of different agencies in relation to system evaluation.

In accordance with Section 13 of the Education Act 1998, the Inspectorate is the main evaluation agency in the education system. The Act identifies the Inspectorate's role as evaluating the quality and effectiveness of educational provision, including comparison with relevant international practice and standards, providing support on the formulation of policy, disseminating information in relation to effective educational initiatives and practice, and advising the Minister on any matter relating to educational policy and provision. In accordance with the Educational Welfare Act 2000, the National Educational Welfare Board has responsibility for collating, reporting and disseminating information on school attendance rates.

Other groups that have responsibility for aspects of evaluation include the Central Policy Unit of the Department, the SEC (see Section 3.1.5 above) and the Educational Research Centre (ERC). The ERC, an independent research institution, partly funded by the Higher Education Authority and the DES, carries out the national assessments at primary level and facilitates the participation of Irish schools in international assessments such as PISA, TIMSS and PIRLS. It also plays an important role in developing standardised tests for schools. The Central Policy Unit, which has a lead role in coordinating the Department's policy development, is responsible for coordinating VFM assessments for the Department.

### *3.1.10 Using system evaluation results*

System evaluation results have a range of uses. These include informing the development of policy and its review, determining the extent to which VFM is being realised in relation to resource allocation and identifying where additional resources will be required. System

evaluation is used to review the performance of the education system in terms of outputs, notably student participation and achievement. They are further used to assure the quality of educational provision, promote accountability, increase public awareness and inform political debate.

The findings of thematic evaluations carried out by the Department's Inspectorate identify trends in particular aspects of educational provision which help to inform the development of education policy and promote improvement at system level. The aggregation and analysis of statistical data relating to student participation and performance in State Examinations helps to identify gaps in uptake and achievement in particular subjects and consequently aspects of curricular provision where additional support and attention is required.

VFM reviews help the Department to seek improvements in order to deliver value for money and enhanced services to customers. The results of international assessments provide valuable information to policy makers about instruction in the tested areas and the achievement of Irish students in these areas relative to international benchmarks.

The national assessments of English reading and mathematics in primary schools help to monitor trends in literacy and numeracy achievement among primary pupils over time, to identify factors related to the achievement of pupils in these areas and to make recommendations for teachers and schools with regard to teaching and assessment in these areas. Another important benefit of these national assessments has been to provide high quality and reliable data for the DES to assist in policy review and formulation and to inform decisions regarding the allocation of resources to English reading and mathematics.

Evaluations of the Department's educational inclusion programme, DEIS, have been conducted by both the Inspectorate (2011c, 2011d) and the Educational Research Centre (Weir, 2011). The Inspectorate's evaluation focussed on 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 and in examinations (post-primary level), and partnership with parents. A key feature of this evaluation is the establishment of processes to monitor and evaluate progress at Departmental, cross-sectoral and local level (school and school-cluster) in relation to a number of aspects such as attendance, drop-out rates and attainment in literacy and numeracy. The Educational Research Centre (ERC) was commissioned by the DES to conduct an independent evaluation of the SSP at both primary and second levels. This evaluation began in early 2007 with the aim of monitoring the implementation of the programme and assessing its impact on students, families, schools, and communities at primary and post-primary levels.. The report of the first phase, 2007-2010 (Weir, 2011), compares attainment levels in 2007 with those of 2010 and presents initial findings on the implementation of the programme, both at the level of the system and at local level. The findings of these evaluations will inform and complement the formulation and establishment of future national education targets for schools serving areas where there are high levels of social and economic disadvantage.

### *3.1.11 Dissemination of evaluation results*

The main mechanisms for ensuring that system-level evaluation results are used effectively by school agents is through the dissemination of those results in publications so that they are available to the general public, policy makers, researchers and the educational community both at national and at local level. For example, schools and centres for education can use the findings of reports when evaluating their own work through school self-evaluation. To this end, an outline of the key findings of national assessments and the implications of these findings are disseminated in pamphlet format to all primary schools. Officials of the Department, such as inspectors, also use the findings of such reports as benchmarks to inform their evaluations.

While hardcopy publications was the most frequent form of dissemination in the past, it is now customary for the DES and bodies under its aegis to issue the results of system evaluations in mainly electronic format, with some copies provided in hardcopy mainly for policy makers and for research institutions. For example, Inspectorate reports, the Annual Output Statements of the DES and Value- for-Money reviews are published on the DES website [www.education.gov.ie](http://www.education.gov.ie) . Reports on national assessments at primary level and international assessments at secondary level are published by the ERC at [www.erc.ie](http://www.erc.ie) .The results of the State Examinations are available in aggregate form in the annual report that is published by the State Examination Commission on its website [www.sec.ie](http://www.sec.ie) . Interested parties including agencies such as employers' groups can look at the trends and comment on issues raised in the reports.

The Chief Inspector's Report is one mechanism for allowing the evaluation work of the Inspectorate to feed into the development of policy. The purpose of the report is to highlight themes arising from the Inspectorate's evaluations within a particular timeframe that can influence the further development of the education system. For example, the Chief Inspector's Report 2001-04 (Inspectorate, Department of Education and Science, 2005a) pointed towards a need for sustained improvement within individual classrooms, in the leadership and management of schools, and in the development of a collaborative professional culture in schools.

### **3.2 Implementation of system evaluation**

While no formal studies have been carried out, there is strong evidence to suggest that the current arrangements for system evaluation have been effective in informing aspects of policy development and resource allocation, improving student participation and to a lesser extent in improving student achievement.

With regard to policy development and resource provision, the DEIS Action Plan (Department of Education and Science 2005a), a national educational inclusion initiative, is an example of a response to issues that have been identified through system evaluation. Such system evaluation has taken the form of surveys carried out by the ERC of literacy achievement among pupils in schools in disadvantaged areas (Eivers et al, 2004; Eivers et al, 2005a) and an Inspectorate evaluation of literacy and numeracy teaching in a sample of such schools (Inspectorate, Department of Education and Science, 2005b). Concerns raised in these evaluations included the seeming limited impact of existing programmes on improving the achievement levels in literacy and numeracy of pupils attending primary schools that serve disadvantaged communities and the need for the systematic monitoring of pupils' literacy and numeracy outcomes. The findings of these reports were reflected in the considerations of the Educational Disadvantage Committee that advised the Minister on the issue of tackling disadvantage (Department of Education and Science, 2005b). The Educational Disadvantage Committee concluded that there was need for a more integrated delivery of school-based educational inclusion measures and for improved methods of identification and selection in order to ensure the appropriate targeting of resources for schools in need. The core features of DEIS reflect the recommendations of these reports: a standardised system for identifying levels of disadvantage; an integrated Schools Support Programme; multi-level monitoring and measurement of progress and evaluation of outcomes. Follow-up evaluations of the programme have been conducted by both the Inspectorate (Department of Education and Skills, 2011d; 2011e) and the Educational Research Centre (Weir, 2011), as outlined in section 3.1.10.

#### *3.2.1 Impact of system evaluation*

The impact of system evaluation on policy and decision-making is also seen in the development of educational provision and support for the Irish language. The findings in an independent evaluation (Harris et al, 2006) of the declining achievement in Irish of pupils in English-medium primary schools and the difficulties cited in Inspectorate reports

(Inspectorate, Department of Education and Science, 2007a, 2007b) regarding the implementation of the Irish curriculum at primary and secondary levels have contributed to the decision to implement additional measures to support the teaching of Irish. These have included professional development supports for teachers and curriculum change such as an increased emphasis on oral competence at secondary level and the development of standardised tests for Irish. The findings of an Inspectorate evaluation of ICT provision (Inspectorate, Department of Education and Science, 2008) regarding the dearth of internet provision in schools informed a policy decision to provide additional connectivity resources at primary and secondary levels.

There is also some evidence of policy change in response to issues that have emerged from analysis of the State Examinations together with findings from other evaluations such as PISA. Of particular note is the curricular reform initiative, *Project Maths* that has been put in place to address concern about students' achievement levels in mathematics at secondary level, namely their problem-solving ability and uptake of the more challenging Higher Level course for the Leaving Certificate (Department of Education and Skills, 2010d). This reform, which involves the introduction of revised syllabuses for both the Junior and Leaving Certificate, places much greater emphasis on students' understanding of mathematical concepts and the development of their problem-solving skills. A further policy option to promote uptake and achievement in mathematics by giving additional points for entry to third level to students who are successful in the subject at Leaving Certificate has been adopted. Evidence is emerging that measures to address participation and retention issues at secondary level have had some success. These measures have included the establishment of the National Educational Welfare Board and the provision of alternative programmes of study at junior and senior cycle to provide for the varying abilities and interests of students. Available data (OECD, 2009) shows that the number of early school leavers at secondary level in Ireland has dropped in the period from 2002 to 2008 that is, 14.6% in 2002 to 11.3% in 2008 which compares favourably with rates of early school leaving in other European countries. Other international comparisons (Eivers et al, 2007) also indicate that Irish students at secondary level perform favourably in relation to educational participation and retention compared with their European peers.

### *3.2.2 Impact of system evaluation on improving standards*

The impact of system evaluation on improving standards is not easily measurable. Despite the introduction of a new curriculum and comprehensive support in terms of resources and professional development for teachers at primary level, the national assessments indicate that the achievement levels of pupils in primary schools in English reading and mathematics have remained static for some time. The results of the 2004 assessment in English reading (Eivers et al, 2005b) indicated that no change in 'national reading standards' had occurred since 1998. Indeed, overall standards in reading do not appear to have changed since 1980. In mathematics, the overall mean score in the 2004 assessment was not significantly different from the overall score in 1999 although there was a significant increase in achievement in some aspects of pupils' learning (Shiel et al, 2006).

Until 2009, the learning achievements of Irish 15-year-olds, as evident in PISA studies (Shiel et al, 2001; Cosgrove et al, 2002; Cosgrove et al, 2005; Eivers et al, 2007), compared favourably with their counterparts in other countries. Irish students performed well above the OECD average in relation to literacy attainment, above the OECD average in science and at the OECD average in mathematics. In each assessment domain in 2006 (Eivers et al, 2007; Eivers et al, 2008), fewer students in Ireland than on average across OECD countries performed at the lowest proficiency levels, indicating relatively good performance among low achievers. Ireland also had significantly more students at the highest level in reading than the OECD average. These findings suggested that the education system in Ireland was relatively successful in attaining equity in learning outcomes, while simultaneously achieving comparatively good standards among lower achievers.

However, the outcomes of PISA 2009 (Cosgrove et al, 2010; Shiel et al, 2010) showed a decline in the reading and mathematics scores of students in Ireland compared to previous PISA tests. Ireland's performance in reading dropped 31 points compared to the PISA 2000 result which represented a move from among the 'above average' performing countries in reading to among the 'average performing' countries. Ireland's mean score in mathematics dropped 16 points between 2003 and 2009 which represented a move from among the 'average performing' countries in mathematics to among the 'below average' performing countries. Ireland remained among the above average performing countries in Science. The extent of the falls in the reading and mathematics scores of Irish students was unexpected. Possible reasons for the decline include changes in the socio-economic composition of the student population, the success in retaining weaker performing students within the educational system, some student disengagement from the tests and the chance inclusion of a number of very low-performing schools which were not found in previous PISA surveys. It must be noted that few educational systems have ever experienced actual changes in educational standards of this size in the relatively short period of time covered by the PISA assessments and independent international research has questioned the accuracy of the extent of the decline in standards reported in PISA 2009.

### **3.3 Policy initiatives**

The approach to evaluating the implementation of the School Support Programme (SSP) of the DEIS Action Plan (Department of Education and Science, 2005a) represents a new development as it attempts to monitor the implementation of the programme and assess its impact on pupils' achievement. Monitoring achievement and other pupil outcomes is an important element of this evaluation at primary level involving the collection of baseline achievement data, the testing and re-testing of pupils and the surveying of pupils in relation to their attitudes to school and their leisure pursuits. At secondary level, achievement outcomes are being monitored using centrally available data on retention levels and performance in the State examinations.

#### *3.3.1 Longitudinal studies*

Another new development is the investigation of educational processes through longitudinal studies. The Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) is currently carrying out a longitudinal study into the processes that shape students' experiences of the educational system at secondary level (Smyth et al, 2004; Smyth et al, 2006; Smyth et al, 2007; Smyth, 2009). Although limited to a defined sample and cross-section of schools, this study<sup>4</sup>, the first of its kind in Ireland, provides significant insights into the processes that shape student experiences and outcomes. To date, findings have been published on the experiences of students at junior cycle and this is informing the debate about the reform of educational provision, both curricular and structural, at this level. It is hoped to use this research as a means of improving tracking and assessment in schools, and in defining reasons for early school leaving.

*Growing Up in Ireland* ([www.dcyia.ie](http://www.dcyia.ie)) is the national longitudinal study of children. It is designed to study examines the factors that contribute to or undermine the well-being of children in contemporary Irish families and to contribute to the setting of effective and responsive policies relating to children, the design of services for children and their families, including policies that affect children's educational development..

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<sup>4</sup> This study has involved the surveying and interviewing of a cohort of 900 students in 12 case study schools since their entry to first year.

### *3.3.2 Collection of aggregated school data*

In July 2011, the DES (2011b) published a national strategy to improve literacy and numeracy standards which aims to radically improve the way in which schools assess and report on student's progress in these areas. The actions in the plan seek to drive more effective generation and use of assessment evidence in schools and in the educational system in order to make sure that students make progress in learning literacy and numeracy skills. Key actions include:

- Monitoring national standards of students achievement in literacy and numeracy and supporting teachers in generating and using assessment data on students' learning
- Requiring all schools to implement standardised tests of reading and mathematics at four fixed points of compulsory education, to report outcomes to parents and boards of management, and to use the outcomes to inform school self-evaluation and improvement
- Collecting national data on student achievement using standardised tests and provide data to schools to enable them to evaluate the comparative performance of their students against national trends and standards
- Using aggregated national data on student achievement in literacy and numeracy to support school self-evaluation, school inspection and school improvement. This includes reporting on the national achievement trends in literacy and numeracy at each of four stages.

### **3.4 Conclusion**

The Department of Education and Skills uses a range of components to evaluate the effectiveness of educational provision in schools. These include Inspectorate evaluations, VFM reviews, national and international assessments, the State examinations and research commissioned by the Department. Such research gives insights into aspects of provision not covered by the other components. The various components of system evaluation appear to meet most information needs at system level and appear to be well aligned with the indicators of system performance. A critical point is that there is a focus on pupil achievement.

There are many examples of system evaluation impacting on policy development such as policy decisions relating to the Irish language, educational disadvantage and the provision for maths in secondary schools. However, it is not evident that system evaluation has led to significant improvements in overall educational achievement. While periodic sample-based national assessments of literacy and numeracy have provided objective and valuable insights into pupil achievement in these areas, no significant overall improvement has been discerned, despite policy responses and interventions.

The DES acknowledges that the carrying out of top-down evaluation and resulting interventions needs to be balanced with the promotion of localised bottom-up evaluation/assessment interventions, followed by planning for improvement. This is reflected in the National Strategy for Literacy and Numeracy which outlines a comprehensive framework to promote school self-evaluation as a basis for school planning and school improvement. While there is significant capacity within the system in terms of the expertise in agencies such as the SEC and the Educational Research Centre to facilitate, collect and communicate the results of system evaluation, there is a need to integrate and ensure the more effective use of results by stakeholders especially at the level of the school. There may also be a need to more systematically integrate the information from the different system evaluation components at national level in order to fully exploit existing data. This may require the further development of statistical, analytical and research competencies within the Department and its research and evaluation agencies.

## CHAPTER 4

### SCHOOL EVALUATION

#### 4.1 Current practices

##### 4.1.1 Overall framework for school evaluation

The framework for 'assessment' at school level emphasises internal school review and self-evaluation through the school development planning (SDP) process, complemented by external evaluation carried out by the Inspectorate.

##### *Internal assessment*

The concept of self-evaluation in the context of education in Ireland has its genesis in the introduction of whole-school evaluation where it was envisaged that external evaluation carried out by the Inspectorate would complement self-evaluation processes in schools. Schools were considered to have a central role with regard to evaluation and development, particularly in terms of identifying existing good practice as well as areas for further development:

*...schools are complex institutions in which change can only come about through internal acceptance by staff and management both of the school's strengths and of the need for action in those areas of activity where further development is desirable. The word is ownership: by the staff of the school of its provision and of responsibility for improving and building on that provision on the basis of an objective evaluation of all aspects of the school's functioning.*

*On their own, schools can take the process only so far, since their staff's experience of other provision is necessarily limited. Consequently, for the process to be effective and to address the core strengths and weaknesses of an individual school's provision, self review needs to be informed by the breadth of experience and comparative knowledge of provision that is provided by an objective external evaluation.*

(Department of Education and Science 1999, p40)

Self-evaluation in the form of self review by schools subsequently became an element of the School Development Planning (SDP) Model that was introduced in the late nineties to Irish primary and secondary schools. The introduction of school development planning was led by two support services for teachers – SDPS operating at primary level and SDPI providing support to post-primary schools. In the context of SPD, self-evaluation relates particularly to the assessment of strengths and weaknesses at the outset of the planning process and assessment of the effect of the planned change on teaching and learning (Figure 4.1). The SDP model provides for the contributions of a range of stakeholders, including management, teachers, parents and other members of the school community, to the school's self-review and planning process.

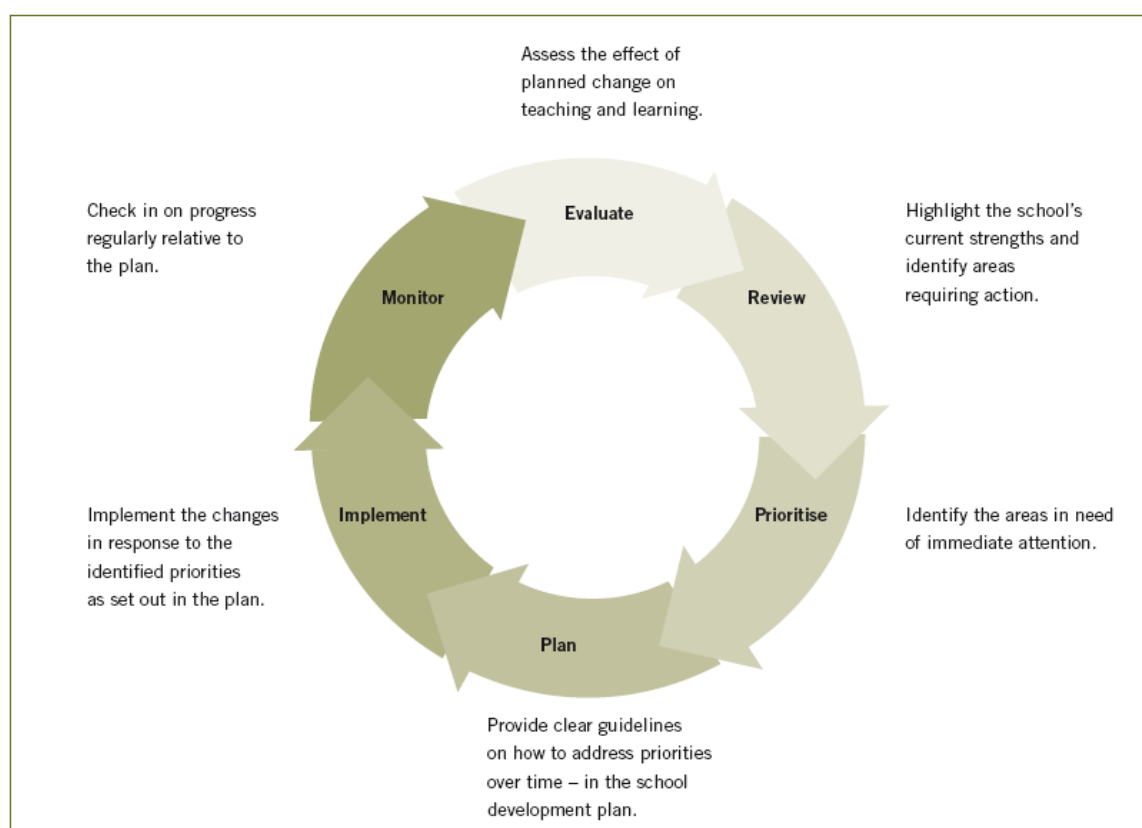
While not explicitly stated, school boards of management and principals have the main responsibility for school self-evaluation by virtue of their role, as outlined in the Education Act 1998, in the development and review of the school plan and objectives for the school. Section 21(1) of the Education Act stipulates that:

*A board shall ... make arrangements for the preparation of a plan [school plan] .....and shall ensure that the plan is regularly reviewed and updated.*

Section 23(2) (d) of the Act stipulates that:

*the Principal shall under the direction of the board and in consultation with the teachers, the parents.... set objectives for the school and monitor the achievement of those objectives.*

Despite the intention that the SDP process would incorporate robust self-evaluations of the strengths and weaknesses of the school as an essential step in driving improvement and change, only limited success has been achieved in the implementation of self-evaluation in most schools. In addition, the outcomes of self-evaluation have been confined to the internal school community with many parents being unaware of the school's assessment of its own strengths and areas for development. For these reasons, current policy is focussed on improving self-evaluation in schools with a view to enabling principals and school communities to make robust evaluations of their progress and to share this information with parents and others in the school community.



**Figure 4.1** The school development planning model. Source: NCCA, 2007, p76

#### *External evaluation*

External school evaluation and quality assurance at primary and secondary levels is mainly the responsibility of the Inspectorate of the DES. The evaluation of primary and secondary schools and centres for education is one of the statutory responsibilities of the Inspectorate (See 4.1.3). Within this legislative framework, the Inspectorate operates a continuous system of in-school evaluation during which it uses a range of inspection models (See 4.1.2)

#### *4.1.2 School evaluation procedures*

As mentioned above, the main approaches to school evaluation in Ireland are school self-evaluation and external review by the Inspectorate through school inspection. Both of these processes are underpinned by the content of the self-evaluation frameworks: *Looking at Our School: An Aid to Self-Evaluation in Primary Schools* (Inspectorate, Department of Education and Skills, 2003a) and *Looking at Our School: An Aid to Self-Evaluation in Second-Level Schools* (Inspectorate, Department of Education and Science, 2003b). These documents present a set of themes through which primary and secondary schools may undertake an internal review and self-evaluation of their own performance and the operation of the school.

The *Looking at Our School* documents provide a framework for evaluating and promoting school effectiveness and improvement in five broad areas:



- school management
- school planning
- curriculum provision
- learning and teaching
- support for pupils

The documents also outline the context factors that should be considered when engaging in school evaluation:

- the size, location and catchment area of the school
- socio-economic circumstances of the pupils and community, including local employment availability and patterns
- pupils' special needs
- the physical, material and human resources available within the school.

As outlined in Section 7(2) (b) of the Education Act, one of the functions of the Minister for Education, and of the Department of Education, is to:

*to monitor and assess the quality, economy, efficiency and effectiveness of the education system provided in the state by recognised schools and centres for education*

The external inspection process, conducted by the Inspectorate, provides an independent assessment of the quality of a school's work in relation to national standards and the context in which the school works. Since the enactment of the Education Act in 1998, the external school evaluation system has developed considerably with the introduction of a broader range of inspection models at primary and secondary levels (Inspectorate, 2006a; Inspectorate, 2010a). The Inspectorate's annual programme of inspection now includes unannounced short inspections, subject-focussed inspections, inspections designed for specific settings (such as schools within the Department's programme for combating educational disadvantage (DEIS) and centres for second-chance education), and whole-school evaluation (WSE). The purpose of these external school evaluation models is to evaluate the quality and effectiveness of aspects of the education provided in primary schools, secondary schools and centres for education, and to provide advice and support to teachers, principals and school management. All models incorporate interviews with key personnel within the school, scrutiny of school planning and self-review documentation, substantial periods of observation of teaching and learning, interaction by inspectors with students in classrooms, and the examination of students' work. In some instances, the schools are notified in advance whilst other inspections are unannounced. Notified inspections include a pre-evaluation stage which involves the collection and analysis of school data. In some instances, this includes questionnaire data from parents and students. Several models incorporate meetings with management, staff and, at times, with representative students and parents. All models include the provision of oral feedback both to teachers following observations and to the principal. In some models, oral feedback is provided to the staff, the board of management and representatives of the patron and parents. Some inspections lead to the publication of a report about the individual school whilst other inspections result in the publication of a composite report.

- *Incidental inspections:* Incidental inspections are evaluations of aspects of the work of primary schools, secondary schools and centres for education under the normal conditions of a regular school day. They usually comprise short, one-day inspections conducted by one inspector and focus on aspects of teaching, learning, students' achievement, and support for pupils. These inspections involve a combination of evaluation, advice and support for schools and teachers. The inspection typically involves evaluation of teaching and learning during a number of lesson periods throughout the school day. It may focus on teaching and learning in one subject or cover a number of different curriculum areas or programmes during the course of the school day. Time is set aside for oral feedback and discussion with the teachers whose lessons have been observed, and with the school principal or deputy principal

where the principal is absent. Approximately 390-400 incidental visits are undertaken at primary school level each year. The process has commenced recently at secondary level and it is estimated that 300-400 incidental inspections will take place during 2012. The model complements other inspection processes, and does not normally result in a written report to the school. The data from these inspections is analysed at national level and the first report, which focussed on literacy and numeracy in primary schools, was published in 2010 (Inspectorate, 2010b).

- *Subject inspections:* Subject inspections are carried out in secondary schools and evaluate the provision for individual subject areas under the headings of whole-school provision and support, planning and preparation, teaching and learning, and assessment and achievement (Inspectorate, Department of Education and Science, 2004). Secondary schools can expect to have at least one, or perhaps two, of these inspections every year. Approximately just over 500 subject inspections take place each year.
- *Programme evaluations:* Programme evaluations are designed to evaluate the effectiveness of programmes such as the Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP), the Transition Year programme (TYP), LCA and LCVP. Programme evaluations examine the quality of both programme organisation and coordination in the school, the quality of programme planning, the quality of teaching and learning, and the quality of the school's evaluation and assessment. Following the evaluation, detailed oral feedback is provided by the inspectors to the principal teacher and staff and, in most cases, to the board of management. Composite reports of these findings published by the Inspectorate feed into system-level recommendations. Both Subject inspections and Programme inspections present an opportunity to:
  - evaluate in a detailed specialised way the work of a subject department in a school
  - provide specialised professional advice to subject specialist teachers
  - provide trend information about the teaching of a subject
- *Evaluation of Centres for Education:* Evaluations of Centres for Education include evaluations of Youthreach and Senior Traveller Training Centres.
- *DEIS evaluations:* DEIS evaluations are a form of whole-school evaluation designed to evaluate the effectiveness of interventions in primary and secondary schools that participate in the DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) programme. All schools participating in DEIS receive a range of additional resources including additional staffing, funding, access to literacy and numeracy programmes, and a range of interventions including the Home School Community Programme and the School Completion Programme. Making sure that the intervention is effective is an important aspect of the DEIS programme. Whilst DEIS schools are subject to all of the evaluation processes and procedures used in non-DEIS schools, of additional importance in DEIS schools is the evaluation of the following interrelated dimensions of the work of the school:
  1. School planning processes in the context of DEIS
  2. How particular DEIS strategies/interventions contribute to the achievement of identified DEIS targets
  3. How DEIS priorities are integrated in the teaching and learning in classrooms

The evaluations focus on the quality of the action planning processes used by the schools to achieve improvement across a range of areas including attendance, attainment levels in literacy, numeracy and in examinations (post-primary level), and partnership with parents. The evaluation process, which incorporates a wide range of data, involves the review of documentation, assessment data and the target-setting

process, observation of teaching and learning, and of DEIS-related activities, meetings with relevant staff and parents, and student and parental questionnaires.

- *Whole-school evaluation:* Whole-school evaluation is designed to evaluate key aspects of the work of the school and to promote school improvement. During a whole-school evaluation, management and planning, teaching and learning, and supports for pupils are evaluated. This enables the evaluation team to identify and affirm the strengths within the school and to make clear recommendations on areas for development and improvement. Whole-school evaluation is a collaborative process involving the teaching staff, the management of the school, parents and pupils. At various stages during the process, members of the school community have the opportunity to interact with the evaluation team to discuss their work, their role, and their vision for the school. Information gathered by means of anonymous questionnaires completed by large samples of students and parents in each school provides further information for the inspection team. Following the in-school evaluation phase of the WSE, the evaluation team discusses the findings and recommendations of the evaluation with the school management and the teaching staff. A draft of the inspection report is sent to the school for factual verification and a school is entitled to append a response to the whole-school evaluation to be published with WSE report. At the end of the evaluation process, the WSE report and the school response, if the school has made a response, are published simultaneously on the DES website.

There are also some variant models of WSE which complement the standard WSE model. These include the Whole-School Evaluation-Management, Leadership and Learning (WSE-MLL) at secondary level which focuses on whole-school issues relating to management, leadership, planning, teaching, learning and assessment along with schools' progress in, and capacity for, self evaluation (Inspectorate, Department of Education and Skills, 2011a).

While inspection models vary, all seek to provide a balanced external perspective on the quality of the work of the school or centre for education taking cognisance of the context in which schools are operating.

By using a combination of short unannounced inspections and a range of subject-focussed or programme focussed inspections, and more intensive whole-school type evaluations, the Inspectorate have been able to increase the frequency of external evaluation. In 2011, for example, some form of external evaluation was carried out in one-sixth of primary schools and in over 600 of the 740 secondary schools in the country.

#### *4.1.3 Competencies to assess schools and to use assessment results*

##### *Self-evaluation*

Schools have been supported in the development of their self-evaluation processes through the dissemination of the *Looking at our Schools* self-evaluation frameworks to all schools and the inclusion of self-evaluation as a key part of the SDP process and its associated programme of professional development for teachers. Nevertheless, external inspection conducted by the Inspectorate indicates that schools are at various stages along the continuum of conducting school self-evaluation. Many schools are at an early stage of development with regard to self-evaluation.

The current Programme for Government seeks to embed self-evaluation effectively in all schools. The Inspectorate has been charged with developing further guidance for schools on self-evaluation. These materials are in trial stage with a number of pilot schools at the time of writing and it is planned to support their implementation through a programme of professional development for teachers and school leaders and by means of advisory visits to schools from

the Inspectorate. It is also planned to develop web-based support for schools to include materials, presentations and other media.

#### *External evaluation*

The Inspectorate's work in evaluating the quality of educational provision in schools and centres of education is established on a statutory basis in the Education Act 1998. The Education Act also underpins the arrangements that have been put in place to facilitate the review of evaluations carried out by the Inspectorate.

Section 13 (3) of the Education Act defines the functions of the Inspectorate in relation to school evaluation as follows:

*An Inspector shall visit recognised schools and centres of education...and following consultation with the board, parents of students and teachers as appropriate...*

- Evaluate the organisation and operation of those schools and centres and the quality and effectiveness of the education provided in those schools and centres*
- Evaluate the education standards in such schools and centres*
- Assess the implementation of regulations made by the Minister*
- Report to the Minister, or the board, patron, parents of students and teachers as appropriate...on these matters and any other matter relating to the activities of those schools or centres and the needs of students attending those schools or centres.*

Section 13 (5) of the Education Act 1998 stipulates that, where an inspector has carried out an evaluation, he or she may make recommendations to the Minister in respect of improvements that he or she considers appropriate. Whole-school evaluations are carried out in accordance with section 7(2)(b) and section 13(3)(a)(i) of the Education Act. The Act places an obligation on the board of management and the staff of a school to accord inspectors every reasonable facility and co-operation in the performance of their duties.

The Inspectorate has put a number of systems in place to ensure that it continues to develop the competencies necessary to carry out its evaluative role effectively and in accordance with the highest professional standards. Inspectors are required to show a range of competences before appointment. The qualifications required for appointment as an inspector, at primary or secondary level, are those of a teacher at the corresponding level of the school system. Applicants must also have at least five years teaching experience and a first or second-class honours primary degree. Secondary inspectors are appointed as specialists in particular subject(s) or subject areas.

In practice, the minimum requirements for appointment as a primary or secondary inspector in Ireland are usually exceeded, and most successful applicants usually present with more extensive experience and career achievements as well as post-graduate qualifications at masters' level and above. The recruitment process for the Inspectorate is based on an open procedure organised by the Public Appointments Service and involves an interview and other tests. Inspectors are appointed on a permanent basis, with civil servant status, by the Minister for Education and Skills, or may be seconded to the service on a temporary basis. New inspectors avail of a comprehensive and extended induction programme, which includes special courses and a mentoring process that involves guidance from experienced staff.

The *Professional Code of Practice on Evaluation and Reporting for the Inspectorate* (Inspectorate, Department of Education and Science, 2002) was developed in accordance with the provisions of Section 13 (8) of the Education Act, 1998 and sets out general principles and guidelines that inform Inspectorate engagement in the process of evaluation and reporting. The general principles of the code are that inspectors will be consistent, fair and courteous and will work with members of the school community in a climate of mutual respect.

Inspectors are also committed to basing their judgements on first-hand evidence and to applying evaluation criteria objectively and reliably.

The Evaluation Support and Research Unit (ESRU) within the Inspectorate supports the ongoing development of its evaluation and reporting competencies through giving advice on best practice in evaluation, developing evaluation instruments, preparing annual inspection plans, analysing inspection reports, providing support for school self-review and publishing reports on all aspects of the education system. ESRU is also involved in ongoing development and review of quality assurance procedures to support the Inspectorate's publication of reports.

In accordance with Section 13 (9) of the Education Act 1998, a mechanism is available for a board of management of a school or a teacher affected by an inspection to request a review of that inspection. Under the review procedure (Inspectorate, Department of Education and Skills, 2006b), a teacher or the board of a school may request the Chief Inspector to review any evaluation carried out by an inspector that affects the teacher or the school. The review procedure applies to all evaluations affecting schools or teachers, including all reports arising from such evaluations, other than those required under existing procedures for teachers experiencing professional difficulties.

Since February 2006, WSE inspection reports, programme evaluation reports and subject inspection reports have been published regularly on the DES website. The publication of inspection reports is a key mechanism in facilitating the use of assessment results by relevant stakeholders. Provisions contained in regulations made by the Minister for Education and Skills entitled the Education Act 1998 (Publication of Inspection Reports on Schools and Centres for Education) Regulations 2006 has underpinned this publication of inspection reports.

#### *4.1.4 Using school evaluation results*

School self-evaluation involves schools collecting evidence and communicating information for a range of purposes. It helps schools to judge what they value, to systematically gather information and to use the information for decision making. It informs school development planning and review processes as schools strive to improve performance and educational provision in their own settings. The primary purpose of school self-evaluation is school improvement. In line with the National Strategy for Literacy and Numeracy a new system of school self-evaluation, requiring all schools to evaluate their own performance year on year, is being introduced in 2012-13. The Department is conscious that implementing school self-evaluation has the potential to make a significant improvement to educational standards.

External evaluation by inspectors complements the continuing efforts of schools and centres for education to review and improve their own work. By identifying, acknowledging and affirming positive aspects of the school's work and suggesting areas for development, they promote self-evaluation and continuous development and improvement in the quality of education offered by schools and their staffs.

While inspection reports establish an agenda for improvement by an individual school, it is the responsibility of boards of management, the school principal and the school staff to implement the recommendations of the reports. In the school response that is part of the WSE reporting process, many schools outline the actions taken or the actions that they intend to take to implement the recommendations of their report. Reports arising from all whole-school evaluation (WSE), subject inspection, programme evaluation and thematic inspections completed since February 2006, are published on the DES website [http://www.education.ie/insreports/school\\_inspection\\_report\\_listing.htm](http://www.education.ie/insreports/school_inspection_report_listing.htm) in accordance with the principles and procedures described in the [Publication of School Inspection Reports - Guidelines](#). These inspection reports provide impartial and balanced information on the

effectiveness of the work of schools and centres for education to parents, students, schools and the wider public that takes into account the context in which the individual school/centre for education is working. At a macro level, the publication of the various inspectors' reports helps to ensure a wider dissemination of the good practice observed.

While inspectors draw upon a wide range of evidence when evaluating the work of schools, including such information as students' scores in standardised tests of reading and mathematics, results in the state examinations, and student retention rates, their reports do not include numerical data that could be used to compile comparative 'league' tables. As mentioned already in 2.2, Section 53 of the Education Act, 1998 permits the Minister for Education and Skills to refuse access to information in respect of the comparative academic performance of schools.

## **4.2 Implementation of school evaluation**

### *4.2.1 Self evaluation*

Self-evaluation practices are not yet well established or implemented in a manner that effectively promotes improvement in the quality of teaching and learning in most schools, but a major initiative to promote school self-evaluation is underway as part of the national literacy and numeracy strategy. There is currently limited use at primary level of pupil assessment data to assess whole-school performance and to identify school targets. One of the findings of the 2009 National Assessments (Eivers et al, 2010) was that while the aggregated results of pupils' standardised test results were widely discussed at staff meetings, the use of such data to establish school-level learning targets was less common. Inspectorate thematic evaluations (Inspectorate, Department of Education and Science, 2005b, 2005c, 2006c, 2007a) have found that the analysis and formative use of assessment data in many schools at whole-school level is not well developed, and that this limits the capacity of schools to monitor progress, to self-review and to assure improvement in pupils' attainment.

There is also evidence that self-evaluation is not widespread at secondary level. The OECD Teaching and Learning in Schools (TALIS) study (Shiel et al, 2009) of school evaluation and teacher appraisal at secondary level found that just forty-four percent of teachers in Ireland work in schools in which a self-evaluation had taken place in the five years prior to the TALIS survey. This compared with eighty percent on average across TALIS countries, and ninety percent in Poland.

### *4.2.2 External evaluation*

A key development in recent years is that external assessment in the form of school inspection has become more systematised and regular at both levels of schooling. Subsequently, there has been a significant increase in the volume of inspection and reporting activity that has been carried out by the Inspectorate (Tables 4.1 & 4.2).

Since the first publication of inspection reports in February 2006, 4261 reports have been available on the Department's website. In addition, evaluations have been carried out in schools, the reports of which have not been published. These include 655 incidental inspections in primary schools and 29 evaluations using the variant WSE model, WSE-MLL.

One of the main concerns in the educational system has been that inspection has occurred too infrequently. For example, the findings of the TALIS summary report for Ireland, based on data collected in 2007 (Shiel et al, 2009) indicated that there was scope for further development in terms of the frequency of inspection in schools. It found that just forty-three percent of teachers in Ireland worked in schools in which an external school evaluation had taken place in the five years prior to the TALIS survey. Although this was well below the TALIS country average of seventy percent, the figure for Ireland was about the same as for

Austria and Denmark. Since 2009, reforms of the Inspectorate have been particularly directed towards addressing this challenge and the frequency of inspections has increased, partly through the introduction of a range of new models of inspection and unannounced short inspections. In 2011, for example, inspections were conducted in over one-sixth of all primary schools and in over 600 of the 740 secondary schools in the country.

The successful implementation of inspection procedures may be attributed to the process of consultation that has accompanied the development of inspection procedures over the past fifteen years. The extensive process of consultation involved in the introduction of WSE has ensured the support of stakeholders for the changes that have been put in place.

There is some evidence of stakeholder satisfaction with the work of the Inspectorate. An independent customer survey of the Inspectorate carried out in 2005 (Department of Education and Science, 2005c) that sought the views of parents, members of boards of management, school principals and teachers found that schools and other stakeholders were very satisfied with the performance of the Inspectorate overall, notably the balanced and informed evaluations it provides on the work of schools. The survey findings highlighted and endorsed many of the Inspectorate's strengths: its professional expertise, objectivity, fairness, professionalism, courtesy, interpersonal skills, and oral and written communication abilities. Findings from the customer survey also suggested some areas in which the Inspectorate could improve its services. These included issuing reports more promptly and achieving improved consistency between oral and written reporting. More recently, an evaluation of the Department of Education and Skills conducted by an independent Government body, the Organisational Review Programme (ORP), praised the work of the Inspectorate and in particular its evaluation work in schools (Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, 2012).

### ***4.3 Policy initiatives***

There is an increasing awareness of the need to link the evaluation of schools more effectively with driving improvement in provision and student achievement. This is reflected in an increased focus on school self-evaluation and on refinements to the external models of school evaluation.

A follow up mechanism is now in place in relation to schools that are identified during inspections as experiencing significant difficulty and where it is evident that intervention is required to assist the school improvement agenda. The School Improvement Group (SIG), was established by the Department in 2008 to ensure that improvement happens following inspection. The SIG, which comprises members of the Inspectorate and officials from the Department's Schools Division and other relevant divisions, coordinates the Department's actions in following up on the recommendations from inspections. The actions coordinated by this group are tailored to the specific needs of the school, and are intended to ensure that the school's patron, management and staff work to improve the quality of provision for students. Follow up on the implementation of recommendations in inspection reports comprises a number of differentiated approaches depending on the challenges facing particular schools. The range of interventions used to promote action and improvement include:

- meetings with the school patrons/trustees, chairpersons of boards and/or principals
- progress reports from the board of management
- support for the school from school support services or services provided by patron or management bodies
- further inspections
- sanctioning school management, where warranted.

The School Improvement Group has been successful in helping an increasing number of schools to improve. Between 2008 and 2011 it has dealt with more than 50 poorly performing primary and secondary schools. In the majority of cases, the SIG has requested the boards of

management of the schools to provide detailed progress reports on improvement. Meetings have been held with boards of management and school patrons and have resulted in a number of significant actions to put improved school governance arrangements in place. In some instances, school principals or other members of staff have resigned. School support services have also provided additional guidance and professional support to some schools. Progress is monitored through seeking update reports from the schools' management and by means of further inspection activity. The outcomes are reviewed carefully by the School Improvement Group. In common with initiatives to improve seriously under-performing schools in other countries, the experience of the School Improvement Group has shown that it can take some time to achieve significant improvement. However, approximately one-third of schools that came to the attention of the School Improvement Group are no longer in the process and there is evidence of significant improvement in a further third. The remainder have either entered the process recently or continue to be a cause for concern. .

The inclusion of a requirement for school self-evaluation in the Programme for Government and in the Literacy and Numeracy Strategy should help to embed self-evaluation practices in schools. It is intended that the evaluation themes of the framework will be continually updated to reflect changes in schools and in the education system generally. In this way, they will continue to be of assistance and relevance to schools, in their internal assessment, review and self-evaluation activities. Nonetheless, schools will require additional support on how to use assessment data effectively to inform their self-evaluation judgements.

#### ***4.4 Conclusion***

There is a comprehensive system of external evaluation now in place to evaluate Irish schools. The Inspectorate of the DES continues to develop its evaluation competences and employs a range of inspection models to provide a fair and accurate picture of the work of schools. The evaluation approaches collect a range of evidence about performance which reflects the school context and broader student learning objectives. Inspectors also bring significant insights to the evaluation context in terms of their familiarity with both the general and specific context of education and the knowledge they develop from observing a range of teaching practices. The findings of inspectors' evaluations contribute to the establishment of an improvement agenda in schools and can facilitate further self-evaluation and development by schools. The publication of school reports has meant that parents have access to comprehensive information about a school's performance at a given time.

Although it is clear that the work of the Inspectorate fulfils an important accountability function, the extent to which such external evaluation activity actually impacts on schools in terms of contributing to improved standards and pupil achievement is not easily measured. Two critical factors emerge regarding school evaluation: the relative infrequency of inspections on individual schools and the limited implementation of self-evaluation processes in schools. The Inspectorate is aware that the relative infrequency of inspections in the past has also limited the availability to the public of the information that inspection reports provide. The efforts to increase the frequency of inspection are intended to begin to address this deficit. In this context, the need to develop self-evaluation processes in schools and to encourage schools to publish information deriving from school self-evaluation becomes even more apparent.

While there is an emerging emphasis on self-evaluation by schools at system level, it is clear that school planning and review needs to focus much more closely on securing improvements in the learning and achievement of pupils. The limited use of self-evaluation in schools is not surprising given the absence of a regulatory requirement that schools engage in self-evaluation. It may also be that schools do not have the necessary knowledge or skills to engage effectively in self-evaluation. For example, there is little evidence that principals see the potential of data on school performance for informing initiatives to improve teaching and learning.



While the *Looking at our School* self-evaluation frameworks identify the areas of content that relate to school self-evaluation, they do not provide sufficient guidance about processes that schools can use in terms of capturing, interpreting and using evidence. In addition, the main reference documents for assessment in the primary schools, the Primary School Curriculum (NCCA, 1999) and the NCCA guidelines on assessment (NCCA, 2007) focus primarily on assessment and reporting practice with regard to individual pupils with little or no reference to the use of assessment data at classroom and at whole-school level.

The Inspectorate's evaluation of DEIS schools indicated the potential linkages that can be made between school self-review and external evaluation. The challenge now is to put further mechanisms in place to support schools in developing their self-evaluation practice in a meaningful way. The proposal in the National Strategy for Literacy and Numeracy (Department of Education and Skills, 2010c) to develop national standards in literacy and numeracy is one concrete step in this direction. However, there will be a need to significantly improve the data handling skills of principals and teachers, such as their ability to analyse the results of standardised tests and how to use the feedback derived from national assessments.

Work is currently underway in achieving a greater alignment between self-evaluation and external evaluation and it is one of the key policy objectives outlined in the National Strategy for Literacy and Numeracy. In order that the two processes are mutually complementary, there is firstly a need to develop self-evaluation practices in Irish schools so that they present an effective tool for managing development within schools. There is also need to further develop the approach to the external evaluation of schools to ensure a greater focus on challenging assumptions and the interpretation of evidence by schools.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **TEACHER APPRAISAL**

#### ***5.1 Current practices***

##### *5.1.1 Overall framework for teacher appraisal*

Teacher appraisal in Ireland needs to be considered under three distinct headings: the appraisal of teachers generally; the appraisal of probationary teachers joining the teaching profession; and the appraisal of under-performing teachers.

##### *The appraisal of teachers generally*

Ireland does not have a formal teacher appraisal system for performance management, accountability or developmental purposes. Monitoring the quality of the teachers' work is part of the role of the principal. However, there is no official requirement or procedure for the formal appraisal of teachers by managers within schools, nor is it a requirement for promotion, and the use of such appraisal appears to be infrequent. For example, forty-four percent of secondary teachers who were surveyed in the Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) summary report (Shiel et al, 2009) stated that they had not received an appraisal of their teaching and/or feedback on it from the principal teacher in their current school, while forty-two percent reported receiving appraisal/ feedback at least once a year. Similarly, it was reported that more teachers in Ireland (fifty-two percent) than in any of the comparison countries stated that they never received appraisal/feedback from other teachers or members of the school management team in the school in which they taught.

The work of individual teachers is evaluated at primary and secondary levels during inspections that are undertaken by the Inspectorate. These include whole-school evaluations, incidental inspections, subject inspections and thematic evaluations. While the reports arising from these evaluations do not provide written evaluative commentary on the work of individual teachers, the inspector provides verbal feedback to individual teachers following the observation of teaching and learning in their classrooms.

##### *The appraisal of probationary teachers*

More formalised teacher appraisal occurs during the probationary process required for the registration of newly qualified teachers with the Teaching Council. For historical reasons, the probationary process, and the appraisal of the teacher's work within this process, differ at primary and secondary level.

Currently, at primary level, the appraisal of probationary teachers' professional competence is carried out by the Inspectorate of the Department of Education and Skills. The involvement of the Inspectorate in this appraisal arises from the historical origins of the primary school system and is delineated in a Departmental circular (DES, 2010b). While the appraisal of primary teachers' performance is rigorous, the process excludes the employing school and the teaching profession, including the principal of the school, from any meaningful involvement in the monitoring of probationary teachers' competence. The arrangement is seen as out of line with the need for the principal of the school to be the leader of learning in the school and to be responsible for the quality of teaching and learning in his/her school.

At secondary level, responsibility for certifying the professional competence of probationary teachers rests with the employer and the Inspectorate is not involved in the process. In practice, the principal of the school, acting on behalf of the board of management, monitors the satisfactory completion of the probationary period in non-VEC schools; this function is frequently exercised by an education officer or a school principal acting on behalf of the CEO in the case of VEC schools.

Although principals in post-primary schools exercise a ‘sign-off’ function in respect of the newly qualified teacher, they frequently do so without any direct observation of the probationary teacher’s classroom work. Consequently, this process makes a very limited contribution to the maintenance of quality within the school or the wider school system.

In 2010, the Minister for Education and Skills decided to provide powers to the Teaching Council to replace both of these arrangements with one common induction and probationary process at both primary and secondary levels. An induction support programme has been established for all newly qualified teachers and the Council (2012) has published draft procedures whereby common arrangements for teacher appraisal will be used in both primary and post-primary schools.

*The appraisal of under-performing teachers*

New procedures for dealing with cases of teacher under-performance were introduced in the school system in late 2009 in line with Section 24(3) of the Education Act 1998 (Department of Education and Skills, 2009b). These procedures give recognition to the role of the board of management and the principal for monitoring the professional competence of an individual teacher in accordance with their statutory responsibility for the quality of education and the management of their teaching staff.

These procedures require the principal of the school (or the chairperson of the board of management of the school in the case of under-performing principals) to identify the under-performance and to bring this to the attention of the teacher concerned. If improvement does not occur, the principal is required to set out an improvement plan for the teacher and to monitor its implementation and the work of the teacher. If, in the opinion of the management of the school, satisfactory improvement does not occur, the board of management seeks an external appraisal of the work of the teacher from the Inspectorate. The report is furnished to the teacher and the board of the school. The board of management may then take disciplinary action against the teacher which may include dismissal. The procedures are in operation in schools, including the involvement of the Inspectorate in a small number of cases.

*5.1.2 Teacher appraisal procedures*

*Teachers generally*

The appraisal of teachers’ work forms a core part of general inspections in schools and feedback is given to individual teachers during school inspections. General inspections include a review of teachers’ planning and assessment documentation, observation of individual teachers’ teaching, teachers’ interaction with pupils, and a review of pupils’ work. The evaluation of teaching and learning looks at methodologies, classroom management, classroom atmosphere, learning and pupils’ achievement. Inspectors make judgements on the quality of pupils’ learning and on the quality of teachers’ practice in accordance with the quality continuum below. An individual teacher’s work is not rated as a result of these inspections and there is no formal mechanism to allow feedback on an individual teacher performance to the principal. However, the findings are collated in the formation of judgements about overall school provision.

Categories	Quality levels	Descriptors
Appropriate/Satisfactory	Very good practice/very good learning	Very good, significant strengths
	Competent practice/good learning	Good, strengths outweigh weaknesses
Not appropriate/Not satisfactory	Scope for development	Fair, weaknesses outweigh strengths
	Experiencing significant difficulty	Poor, significant weaknesses

**Table 5.1** Inspection quality continuum (Inspectorate, Department of Education and Skills, 2011b)

### *Probationary teachers*

As outlined above, the Inspectorate of the DES has traditionally had the main responsibility for evaluating and reporting on the work of newly qualified primary school teachers during their probationary period. In accordance with the provisions of the Teaching Council Acts 2001 and 2006, policy on the appraisal of teacher professional competence during the probationary process is evolving and has led to changes to the probationary process for primary teachers as outlined in Circular 0047/2011 (Department of Education and Skills, 2011d).

From the start of the 2010/2011 school year, new arrangements for the probation of primary teachers have been put in place on an interim basis pending the transfer of responsibilities for establishing procedures and criteria for the induction and probation of teachers to the Teaching Council at a date in the future. These interim arrangements consist of two unannounced inspection visits, which each last about half a school day. During the inspection visits, the inspector evaluates in accordance with set criteria (Table 5.1) the teacher's effectiveness in a classroom environment and in teaching curriculum areas and subjects as outlined in the Primary School Curriculum (NCCA, 1999). The inspector also provides oral feedback and advice to the teacher during each visit in accordance with these criteria. The principal (or another fully registered teacher nominated by the principal) may be present during the inspector's feedback. Following the two inspection visits, the inspector determines whether or not the teacher has demonstrated satisfactory professional competence in the educational setting in which their work has been observed. Failure to complete satisfactorily, and within the stipulated time limit, the conditions attached to registration by the Council may result in the registration of the teacher lapsing and this may have implications for his/her eligibility for employment in a school. The following table outlines the criteria used by the inspectorate in their evaluation of the work of primary school teachers for probationary and registration purposes.

<b>Planning, preparation and recording of progress</b>	<b>Classroom management and organisation</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adequacy of class timetable referenced to the recommended minimum weekly timeframe in the <i>Primary School Curriculum</i></li> <li>• Clarity of teaching objectives, both long-term and short-term</li> <li>• Suitability of objectives: extent of reference to <i>Primary School Curriculum</i> (with due regard for its underlying principles) and the School Plan</li> <li>• Range and appropriateness of resources</li> <li>• Provision for differences in pupil abilities</li> <li>• Quality and effectiveness of progress records</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Promotion of good discipline and behaviour</li> <li>• Cultivation of a caring relationship with pupils (including use of praise and positive feedback)</li> <li>• Overall attractiveness of environment (layout, quality of display including pupils' work, interest centres etc.)</li> <li>• Accessibility and use of resources</li> <li>• Management of Special Needs Assistant (SNA) support (where appropriate)</li> </ul>
<b>Quality of teaching across curriculum areas</b>	<b>Quality of pupils' learning in curriculum areas</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Variety and suitability of teaching methods, including whole class, group or individual learning</li> <li>• Match of work to pupil ability with particular reference to attention levels and receptiveness of pupils</li> <li>• Communication skills e.g. questioning, explaining, responding, and quality of relationships and interactions between teacher and pupils and pupils with each other</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Extent to which pupils are on task and working purposefully</li> <li>• Range and suitability of material covered</li> <li>• Pupils' knowledge of subject matter, skills and attitudes</li> <li>• Quality of learning outcomes, including written work</li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assessment procedures, monitoring and recording of learning</li> <li>• Structure and pace of lessons</li> <li>• Regard for continuity and progression</li> </ul>	
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**Table 5.2:** Criteria used in the inspection of the work of primary school teachers for probationary and registration purposes (Department of Education and Skills, 2010e)

*Under-performing teachers*

Teacher appraisal as an external review of an established teacher’s professional competence is primarily undertaken where there are concerns about the quality of their teaching. The format that this inspection takes is determined by the Chief Inspector. It may involve a series of visits, including unannounced visits, to the teaching and learning situation in question by a member of the Inspectorate who has been assigned by the Chief Inspector following a request from a board of management of a school for such a review. The assigned inspector will have whatever access to the teaching and learning situation they require in order to provide a professional view on the competence of the teacher. The inspector provides a report which sets out the conclusions reached in relation to the concerns raised by the board of management and the report is made available to the board for consideration.

*Review of an inspection*

As pointed out in 4.1.3, a teacher affected by an inspection may seek a review of the inspection in line with procedures for the review of inspections that have been developed in accordance with Section 13(9) of the Education Act (1998) (Inspectorate, Department of Education and Skills, 2006b). The review procedure applies to all evaluations affecting schools or teachers, including all reports arising from such evaluations, other than those required under existing procedures for teachers experiencing professional difficulties.

*5.1.3 Competencies to appraise teachers and to use appraisal results*

*Legislative framework*

An evolving legislative framework underpins the appraisal of probationary teachers in schools. The Education Act, 1998 places responsibility on a school to monitor its quality and also gives a school powers to monitor teacher performance. Implementation of these powers is not rigorous as yet, but a number of measures will facilitate greater implementation of the vision set out in the Act including increasing emphasis on self-evaluation, changes to probationary processes and the implementation of Section 24. It is also expected that the full enactment of the Teaching Council Acts 2001 and 2006 will reduce the role that the Inspectorate is to play in the evaluation of the professional competence of probationary teachers.

The role of the Inspectorate has also changed with regard to how issues in relation to the professional competence of teachers are processed. The enactment of Section 24 (3) of the Education Act 1998 (Department of Education and Skills, 2009b) places the responsibility for identifying issues of professional competence in a teachers’ work with the principal and the board of management of a school. The composition of a board of management is

- Two direct nominees of the patron
- Two parents of children enrolled in the school (one mother and one father) elected by the parents
- The principal
- One other teacher elected by the teaching staff.
- Two extra members agreed by the representatives of the patron, teachers and parents.

The board is expected to comply with the revised procedures in relation to professional competence issues and general disciplinary matters outlined in circular 60/2009. In line with

this circular, the Inspectorate only becomes involved as part of the process on request from the board of management of a school.

#### *Competency of School Leaders to Appraise Teachers*

Whilst the Education Act, 1998, places responsibility on a school to monitor its quality and also gives a school powers to monitor teacher performance, the implementation of these powers is not rigorous as yet. However, the Literacy and Numeracy Strategy aims to build the capacity of school leadership to engage in robust school self-evaluation particularly in relation to teaching and learning. The recently-published draft *Guidelines for School Self-Evaluation* (Inspectorate, 2012) highlight the importance of the observation of teaching and learning noting that it is a practical and powerful method of obtaining direct, first-hand information or evidence about teaching and learning. To support leaders, these guidelines include specific advice and tools to facilitate the observation of teaching. The PDST also provides a range of CPD programmes for newly appointed school leaders to support them in the development of their personal and professional capabilities or capacities.

<https://sites.google.com/a/pdst.ie/pdst/leadership-and-planning> .

#### *Competency of Inspectors to Appraise Teachers*

The Inspectorate has a number of mechanisms in place to support the ongoing development of its evaluation and reporting capabilities. On their appointment, inspectors engage in an in-depth induction programme of four-six month's duration that contains explicit modules on lesson observation and teacher appraisal. To complement the theoretical components of the programme, which includes the analysis of teachers' videoed practice, the induction programme incorporates several weeks of practical experience work shadowing colleagues as they engage in both lesson observation and the appraisal of teachers.

The Inspectorate also has a comprehensive continuing professional development programme in place that enables inspectors to continue with the development of their knowledge of evaluation processes, the development of their inspection and reporting skills and their knowledge of educational processes and the educational system in general. The Inspectorate's *Professional Code of Practice on Evaluation and Reporting for the Inspectorate* (Inspectorate, Department of Education and Science, 2002) aspires to ensure consistency, fairness, objectivity and reliability in the work of inspectors (See 4.1.3).

#### *5.1.4 Using teacher appraisal results*

##### *Teachers Generally*

Following a general inspection, the inspectors' findings in relation to teachers' professional practice are collated in the formation of judgements about overall school provision. Reports from incidental inspections of individual teachers have also informed policy initiatives such as the Department's strategy for literacy and numeracy (Department of Education and Skills, 2011b). The report on the incidental inspections (Inspectorate, Department of Education and Skills, 2011b) indicated that a significant minority of schools and teachers needed to improve their practice in relation to the teaching methods used in English and mathematics lessons, the quality of preparation undertaken by teachers for the lessons and the quality of assessment practices in each of the subjects. The report recommended that weaknesses in preparation, teaching approaches and assessment be tackled at classroom, school and system levels in order to ensure better outcomes for learners. The National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy prioritises the development of literacy and numeracy in the education system and places a considerable focus on the development of assessment procedures at local level and system level to support improvement in these areas.

##### *Probationary Teachers*

In the case of probationary teachers, reports of inspections are used to certify the teacher's competence to teach. The probation of primary teachers is a key element in their professional

recognition, as successful completion of the probationary period is a pre-requisite for employment as a fully recognised primary teacher. Probationary teachers who do not demonstrate satisfactory professional competence or require a further period to do so receive a written report outlining the outcomes of the evaluation and advice for further development.

The outcomes of teacher evaluation by the Inspectorate have also been used to inform policy in relation to issues such as teacher education and the practice of teacher education providers. For example, collation of the outcomes of the Inspectorate’s evaluation of probationary teachers in primary schools informed the writing of the composite report *Beginning to Teach* (Inspectorate, Department of Education and Skills, 2005d). This report identified trends and issues of relevance to policy makers and provided advice to teachers, schools, teacher educators, and professional development providers in relation to supporting newly qualified teachers. One of the recommendations of the report was the development of a national system of induction to meet the professional needs of newly qualified teachers during their initial years of teaching. This contributed to the decision to extend a National Pilot Project on Teacher Induction established in 2002 into a National Induction Programme for teachers from September 2010.

#### *Underperforming Teachers*

In instances where inspectors carry out a review of an established teacher’s work in accordance with Department procedures relating to professional competence issues, the report provided may be used by the board of management of the school where the teacher is employed to support its decision to take disciplinary action, including suspension or dismissal of the teacher.

### **5.2 Implementation of teacher appraisal**

As outlined in Section 4.2, the number of teachers experiencing external evaluation of their work through other forms of external evaluation such as whole-school evaluations, subject inspections and incidental inspections continues to rise. However as pointed out in the TALIS summary report for Ireland (Shiel et al, 2009), many teachers at secondary level do not regularly experience such evaluation. Notably, those teachers who had received feedback on their teaching viewed it as constructive. Most teachers in Ireland (87.9%) and on average across the TALIS countries (82.9%) reported that the appraisal and feedback they received had been fair, and that it was helpful in their development as teachers (Ireland, 78.8%, TALIS average, 78.6%). Meanwhile, there is no official requirement or procedure for the formal appraisal of teachers by managers within schools, nor is it a requirement for promotion.

The probation of teachers has formed an increasing part of the Inspectorate’s work at primary level in recent years (Table 5.3). This peaked in 2008 when a total of 2,649 probationary teachers were evaluated by inspectors compared with 1,611 such teachers in 2005. There is some evidence that the involvement of the Inspectorate in the probationary process impacts positively on the teachers involved. Most of the teachers (86%) who responded to a questionnaire that was disseminated as part of a composite evaluation of newly qualified teachers (Inspectorate, Department of Education and Science, 2005d) gave a positive rating to the inspector as a source of support during the probationary process. In particular, there was a positive reaction to the professional advice and guidance provided by the inspector.

<b>Year</b>	<b>2005</b>	<b>2006</b>	<b>2007</b>	<b>2008</b>	<b>2009</b>	<b>2010</b>	<b>Total</b>
Number of teachers on probation	1,611	2,080	2,362	2,639	2469	1,734	12,895

**Table 5.3:** Number of primary teachers who proceeded with probation and were evaluated by the Inspectorate 2005-2009 (Source: Evaluation, Support and Research Unit, Inspectorate, March 2011)

### 5.3 Policy initiatives

From 1 September 2012, the Teaching Council will have responsibility for the induction and probation of teachers. The Career Entry Professional Programme (CEPP) is the new programme that is being proposed by the Teaching Council to replace the current arrangements for the induction of newly qualified teachers and their probation for registration purposes. The Teaching Council has published a consultation document

<http://www.teachingcouncil.ie/fileupload/Teacher%20Education/CEPP/CEPP%20Consultation%20Document%20Final.pdf>

outlining the key elements of the proposed CEPP, the proposed timeframe for completion of the programme, the key phases in the programme and the roles of the various stakeholders including newly qualified teacher, mentor, school principal, the Inspectorate, the National Induction Programme for Teachers and the Teaching Council. The Teaching Council is currently engaging in a comprehensive consultation process in relation to the standards for full registration and other aspects of the CEPP. This includes meetings with a range of stakeholders including mentors, principals' bodies, school management bodies and teacher unions in order to present its proposals and hear feedback in relation to same. The Teaching Council has also invited written feedback in relation to these proposals.

The new arrangements are intended to be phased in during the period September 2012-September 2015. The arrangements will involve an appraisal of the teacher's competence by the principal following periods of observation and feedback and a submission of a satisfactory report to the Teaching Council as a requirement for full registration. The Council has also asked the Inspectorate to inspect a 10% sample of all probationary teachers annually as a quality assurance mechanism. In addition, the principal of a school will be required to ask the Inspectorate to inspect the work of any teacher who appears to be experiencing professional difficulties prior to a submission of a report to the Teaching Council. The following table outlines the draft standards for full registration with the Teaching Council.

#### ***The Standards for Full Registration***

<b><i>Professional Knowledge and Understanding</i></b>
The NQT knows and understands: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- the key principles of planning, teaching, learning, assessment, reflection and self-evaluation set out in <i>Initial Teacher Education: Criteria and Guidelines for Programme Providers</i></li><li>- his/her sector, the school in which he/she teaches and his/her professional responsibilities within them</li><li>- theoretical principles and perspectives that underpin his/her professional values and practice including the rationale for what and how he/she teaches</li><li>- developments in teaching, learning and assessment arising from ongoing engagement with educational literature and research.</li></ul>
<b><i>Professional Skills and Competences</i></b>
It takes several years of experience to develop sophisticated expertise in teaching and assessment. Along with responsibility for pupils in the class, the NQT is also accountable to his/her employer and to parents/guardians and must operate in line with national and school policies. It is an ongoing challenge for the NQT to demonstrate the necessary professional skills and competences for full registration.
<b>The NQT can:</b>
<b>Planning, Teaching, Learning and Assessment</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- plan teaching programmes that are coherent, progressive and stimulating and that are informed by national curricular policy, school policies, self-evaluation and assessment of, and for, student learning</li><li>- formulate lesson objectives that are clear and appropriate and that take account of the individual potential, backgrounds and learning experiences of pupils</li><li>- use teaching strategies, including use of resources, that align with the needs of students</li></ul>



- avail of opportunities for curricular integration where they arise
- promote inclusion and equity by challenging all students to participate fully in their learning
- assess and record student learning and provide feedback to students on their progress
- make appropriate use of ICT to support teaching, learning and assessment.

#### **Communication and Relationship-Building**

- develop and sustain positive working relationships with students
- negotiate learning goals with students
- report student progress to parents/guardians and other teachers
- collaborate competently and appropriately with other teachers, support staff, and parents and with the wider community in accordance with school protocols.

#### **Classroom Management and Organisation**

- organise and manage the classroom environment to ensure safe, orderly and purposeful learning activity
- manage classroom behaviour fairly, sensitively and consistently and in line with school discipline policies and procedures
- identify students whose behaviour suggests the need for additional support and know how to secure that support.

*Table 5.4 The Draft Standards for Full Registration by the Teaching Council, 2012.*

### **5.4 Conclusion**

In Ireland, there is no formal mechanism for the appraisal of individual teachers for performance management, accountability or developmental purposes. Although the Education Act, 1998, places responsibility on a school to monitor its quality and also gives a school powers to monitor teacher performance, there appears to be limited in-school appraisal of teachers. The absence of a mandated performance management system in schools is a significant gap and weakens the capacity of school management to carry out appraisals and to link appraisal with individual teacher accountability and improvement.

Currently, the Department's inspectorate is involved in the appraisal of newly qualified teachers as part of their probationary period in primary schools, but this not occur at secondary level. The assessment of teachers' work forms a core part of general inspections in schools and inspectors provide individual teachers with feedback on aspects of their teaching that constitute good practice as well as aspects that require further development. Whilst these findings are collated in the formation of judgements about overall school provision, there is no formal mechanism to allow feedback on individual teacher performance to the principal who, with the school's board of management is ultimately responsible for the quality of educational provision in the school. Such feedback would be critical to help affirm strong practitioners, provide support to weak practitioners and enable the principal teacher to address deficiencies and help to build a greater link between appraisal and accountability at the level of the individual teacher.

Teacher appraisal in Ireland currently has a limited accountability function. For the most part, the performance of individual teachers is not linked to incentives such as pay or career except in two instances:

- In the case of probationary teachers, failure to achieve a satisfactory rating will delay or impede teacher recognition which in turn can adversely impact on the payment of salary increments and eligibility for applying for teaching positions
- An inspector's review of the professional competence of an individual teacher on request from the board of management can contribute to a school's decision to suspend or dismiss a teacher.

Recent policy initiatives represent a significant new emphasis on teacher appraisal in the work of both school principals and the Inspectorate. The new procedures for dealing with under-performance, which were put in place in 2010, enable schools to formally discipline and, if

necessary, dismiss under-performing teachers. These procedures emphasise the role of the principal and board of management in monitoring the professional competence of teachers. In addition, the procedures facilitate an independent review of the teacher's work by the Inspectorate. The draft procedures proposed by the Teaching Council for the induction and probation of teachers at both primary and secondary level also reflect an important development in the in-school appraisal of teachers. The Council's proposals, which are intended to come into effect in a phased manner from 2012-2014, will require the teaching profession and the principals of schools to assess and approve the work of the new entrant to the teaching profession as a condition of full registration. The Council has cooperated with the Inspectorate in this initiative and it is intended that the Inspectorate will continue to play an important role in the appraisal of these teachers. Meanwhile, the Literacy and Numeracy Strategy (Department of Education and Skills, 2011b) and the recently published draft Guidelines for School Self-Evaluation (Inspectorate, 2012) aim to build the capacity of school leadership to engage in robust school self-evaluation particularly in relation to teaching and learning. These initiatives all reflect an increasing acknowledgement of the critical role of teacher appraisal and strengthen its use, particularly at in-school level, for developmental and accountability purposes.

There may also be a need for the Inspectorate to define and share more explicitly how inspectors rate the quality teaching for established teachers, as it does in the case of probationary teachers. The Inspectorate uses a range of templates during school inspections that are underpinned by fair and reliable indicators of performance and inspectors receive ongoing professional development to enable them to apply those indicators fairly. There are also several sources at system level of what constitutes good teaching practice such as in guidelines for teachers in the curriculum documents. However, there is little articulation of how and on what criteria teachers are assessed during inspections apart from the headings under which the Inspectorate will report. It is also not always evident in published inspection reports what is meant by qualitative terms such as 'good' and 'poor' in the context of practice that has been observed.

## CHAPTER 6

### STUDENT ASSESSMENT

#### 6.1 *Current practices*

##### 6.1.1 *Overall framework for student assessment*

The overall framework for student assessment at primary and secondary levels is characterised by varying levels of emphasis on summative and formative assessment. Summative assessment has been the dominant form of assessment particularly at secondary level due to the influence of the State examinations. There is an emergent focus on formative assessment and its potential for improving the quality of individual pupils' learning. In particular, there is an increasing awareness of AfL as a tool to improve learning outcomes.

##### *Primary*

The evolution of assessment performance and practice is particularly evident at primary level. The Primary School Curriculum (NCCA, 1999) conceptualises the functions of assessment as summative, formative, diagnostic and evaluative. It identifies assessment as an integral part of teaching and learning and a means of identifying children's learning needs. It also emphasises the importance of assessing the process of learning as well as the product.

More detailed policy guidelines on assessment for primary education, *Assessment in the Primary School Curriculum: Guidelines for Schools* (NCCA, 2007) develop the thinking underpinning the Primary School Curriculum by re-envisioning assessment as:

- *Assessment for Learning*: The teacher uses evidence on an ongoing basis to inform teaching and learning
- *Assessment of Learning*: The teacher periodically records children's progress and achievement for the purpose of reporting to parents, teachers and other relevant persons

The guidelines present these two approaches as complementary forms of assessment that together provide teachers with evidence of children's progress and achievement in learning which enables teachers to make decisions about adjusting teaching to meet children's learning needs more effectively.

In the context of AfL, the NCCA assessment guidelines emphasise pupil assessment as a continuous process where teachers make judgements about children's learning and development continuously over a period of time rather than sporadically. The concept of AfL extends the potential of formative assessment in that it emphasises the learner's active role in his/her own learning. Key features of AfL include the sharing of learning goals with learners, helping learners to recognise the standards they are aiming for, involving learners in assessing their own learning, providing learners with feedback, communicating confidence to learners that every learner can improve, and adjusting teaching to take account of the results of assessment.

Within the above framework, schools are encouraged to use a range of assessment approaches. Schools are also mandated to administer standardised tests at three points of the primary school cycle.

##### *Secondary*

Formative assessment also features at secondary school although summative assessment dominates due to the influence of the Junior Certificate and the Leaving Certificate Examinations, which act as summative assessments for the junior and senior cycles respectively. In addition, the high stakes status of the Leaving Certificate Examination due to

its association with entry to third level has resulted in the predominance of summative assessment approaches percolating down to the early years of the secondary cycle.

Consideration of other assessment approaches at secondary level such as AfL has emerged in recent years in accordance with a review of the appropriateness of the current junior cycle programme to the needs of students in terms of content and modes of assessment (e.g. NCCA, 2005b; NCCA, 2005c; NCCA 2010b). The AfL initiative arose out of the consultations around the junior cycle review, during which it became clear that there was need for greater emphasis on a broader range of assessment methods in the initial training and ongoing professional development of teachers.

### *Special Education*

AfL is emphasised as a concept in guidelines on special education at secondary level, *Inclusion of Students with Special Educational Needs: Secondary Guidelines* (Inspectorate, Department of Education and Science, 2007c). These guidelines emphasise the benefit of students' involvement in identifying learning targets and self-assessment to learning and to the student-teacher relationship.

The identification of pupils with special educational needs is an important aspect of the assessment framework at primary and secondary levels. A staged approach model of assessment and intervention (Department of Education and Science, 2005d) is in place, which consists of three distinct processes (See 6.1.2). Schools are advised to adopt the staged approach before requesting a formal psychological assessment from State-funded external services. These external services include psychologists from the National Psychological Service (NEPS), which is under the aegis of the DES, and services under the aegis of the Department of Health and Children such as paediatric services, speech and language therapy, and occupational therapy.

### *The allocation of responsibilities*

In accordance with the Education Act 1998, the assessment of students and the communication of the results of assessment to parents is the responsibility of the principal teacher and teachers. Section 22 (1) (b) of the Act states that:

*...the Principal and teachers shall regularly evaluate students and periodically report the results of the evaluation to the students and their parents.*

In order to fulfil the requirements of the Act, schools are expected to create and maintain individual records of children's learning while they are attending school. There is no national system for tracking students' progress through primary education but the DES maintains a student database for secondary education, which includes records of students' examination results.

As noted above, schools may need to consult with NEPS psychologists in relation to the assessment of pupils with special educational needs. Psychologists from the NEPS work in partnership with teachers, parents and students in identifying educational needs. They offer a range of services aimed at meeting these needs, for example, supporting individual students (through consultation and assessment), special projects and research. As the NEPS is not yet available to all schools, schools without access to NEPS psychologists may obtain a psychological assessment from psychologists working in a private capacity under the Scheme for Commissioning Psychological Assessments (SCPS). See

<http://www.education.ie/home/home.jsp?pcategory=33437&ecategory=35638&language=EN>

While responsibility for student assessment at secondary level is initially that of the school and the teacher, the State examinations, as a national and centralised system, play a central assessment role in secondary schools. The SEC has responsibility for the administration of the State examinations for all students sitting the Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate examinations. The SEC aims to provide a high quality examinations and assessment system that is

*efficient, fair and accessible, ensuring that the system is operated in an environment of openness, transparency and accountability.*

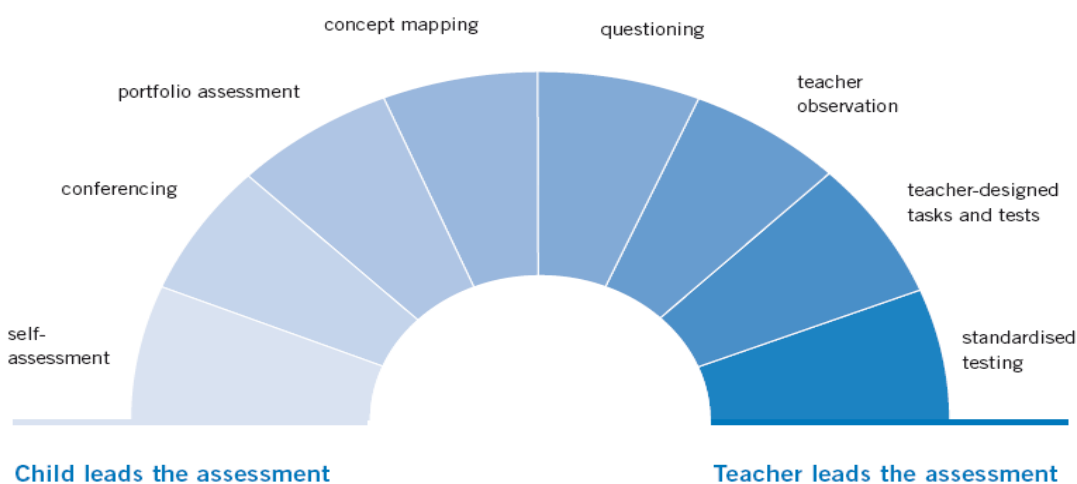
(State Examinations Commission, 2008, p3)

The core work of the SEC is to provide examination papers, to organise examination centres, and to ensure reliable and consistent assessment of students within a given timeframe. It also manages the performance criteria and reference standards in collaboration with the DES, other government departments and State agencies, and a diverse range of partners and stakeholders. For example, the NCCA establishes the framework for assessment for each subject as the syllabus for a given subject undergoes review. Once such developments are agreed, sanctioned by the Minister for Education and Skills and passed to the SEC for implementation, they become part of the national assessment system. The SEC is represented on NCCA committees and overarching structures.

### 6.1.2 Student assessment procedures

#### Primary

A range of assessment approaches are recommended at primary level within the overall *Assessment of Learning* and *Assessment for Learning* framework. The Primary School Curriculum (NCCA, 1999) provides for the use of assessment approaches such as teacher observation, teacher-designed tasks and tests, work samples, portfolios and projects, curriculum profiles, diagnostic tests and standardised tests. The NCCA guidelines on assessment (NCCA, 2007) present these and other assessment approaches as a continuum of approaches moving from those that are pupil-led such as self-assessment and conferencing to those that are more teacher-led such as teacher observation, teacher-designed tasks and tests, and standardised testing. Assessment approaches such as portfolio assessment, concept mapping and questioning appear towards the middle of such a continuum.



**Figure 6.1:** A continuum of assessment methods (Source: NCCA, 2007, p13)

Standardised testing, as it exists in the primary sector, is the only nationally mandated assessment used in the education system for primary education and, as such, is a significant element in the assessment of students in the primary education system. Standardised tests are available in English reading, English spelling, Irish and mathematics. The selection of the appropriate standardised test instrument is a matter for decision by individual schools, provided that the chosen tests are normed for the Irish population and are consistent with the Primary School Curriculum (1999). All standardised tests take the form of pencil and paper tests. It is possible to convert raw scores on the test to standard scores, sten scores and percentile ranks. These scores allow teachers to track a pupil's progress over time and to benchmark their performance with reference to pupils nationally at the same class level. It is

the responsibility of the schools to administer the tests, to record the results and to make the results available to relevant parties such as the parents of individual pupils, other teachers on transfer of the pupils to either another primary schools or to post primary school, and the Inspectorate from the DES.

Test	Areas Covered in the Tests	
English Reading	reading vocabulary and reading comprehension	
English Spelling	word spelling, sentence/story completion, error detection	
Irish	vocabulary, spelling, language usage and reading comprehension	
Mathematics	Strands:	number, algebra, shape and space, measures and data
	Skills:	applying and problem-solving, understanding and recalling, communicating and expressing, integrating and connecting, reasoning, implementing, understanding and recalling

**Table 6.1:** Standardised Test Content

Since 2007, the DES has required primary schools to administer standardised tests in English reading and Mathematics at two points of the primary cycle (Department of Education and Science, 2006). The two points for this mandatory testing are the end of the third year of primary schooling or the beginning of the fourth year of primary schooling (7-8 year olds) and the end of the sixth year of primary schooling or the beginning of the seventh year of primary schooling (10-11 year olds). From 2012, all primary schools are required to administer standardised tests to all eligible students at the end of second, fourth and sixth class (Department of Education and Skills, 2011c). However, many primary schools administer standardised tests in English reading and Mathematics to all class groups from the third year to the final year of primary schooling. Schools also make use of standardised tests to assess pupils' learning of the Irish language. As part of the development of the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy, primary schools will be required, from 2012, to report annually to the DES the aggregated standardised test results of pupils at the aforementioned three points of the primary school cycle. There is no intention to publish data from individual schools or to enable the data to be used for the compilation of league tables.

### *Secondary*

The assessment approaches recommended for secondary schools include formal methods, informal methods, and diagnostic methods (Inspectorate, Department of Education and Science, 2007c). Formal methods of assessment include standardised, criterion-referenced and certain diagnostic tests. In line with the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy, the DES will commission the development of standardised tests in English reading, Irish reading and Mathematics which students will sit at end of second year in secondary school from 2014 onwards. State examinations, such as the Junior Certificate and the Leaving Certificate examinations, mock examinations and end-of-term school examinations are also regarded as formal methods of assessment. Informal methods of assessment include classroom tests administered at the end of topics or segments of the syllabus to assess student's knowledge and mastery of particular skills, informal observation by the teacher, evaluation of homework, and informal analysis of students' language and social development. The in-school diagnostic assessment by teachers of students with special educational needs can be carried out using either formal or informal methods of assessment. The objective of diagnostic assessment is to identify the student's learning strengths and needs.

With regards formal assessment, in the context of State examinations, most subjects have a second component. In languages, for example, there is a written and aural element in Junior Certificate, while Leaving Certificate language examinations have oral, aural and written components. In other subjects, especially those with practical components, it is customary for a portion of the marks in State examinations to be allocated for practical tasks, in addition to written ones. In some subjects, a portfolio of work or a pre-submitted project is included,

along with the written examination, in order to arrive at the student's overall mark in a subject. At present, all marking, whether of written, oral or aural examinations, or practical, project or portfolio elements, is carried out by the SEC. The weighting of summative assessment marks varies, although generally the portion of marks allocated to written components of State examinations is between 60% and 80%. A teacher at present is not asked to allocate an overall grade to any portion of a student's work for State examination, although current proposals for reform of the Junior Certificate anticipate that this may change in the future.

Within schools themselves, teachers and subject departments are free to employ an assessment framework similar to that which obtains in the relevant subject for State examination, or may decide to rely entirely or more firmly on formal written assessment of students' work. Reliance on written testing, in the main, is found especially in the early years of secondary education when language skills, portfolios, and teachers' knowledge of students may not be adequately developed to facilitate realistic assessment outside of written examinations at the end of term or end of the school year.

The Junior Certificate and the Leaving Certificate examinations strongly influence how the teaching of subjects is delivered and assessed at secondary level. The Junior Certificate is a national examination taken by almost every student at the end of the junior cycle. The examination is offered in the following subjects and levels from which pupils select 8-10 including English, Mathematics and Irish (unless they have been awarded an exemption).

<b>Subject</b>	<b>Level</b>	<b>Subject</b>	<b>Level</b>
Irish	Higher, Ordinary and Foundation	Material Technology (Wood)	Higher and Ordinary
English	Higher, Ordinary and Foundation	Metalwork	Higher and Ordinary
Mathematics	Higher, Ordinary and Foundation	Technical Graphics	Higher and Ordinary
History	Higher and Ordinary	Business Studies	Higher and Ordinary
Geography	Higher and Ordinary	Typing	Higher and Ordinary
French	Higher and Ordinary	Environmental and Social Studies	Higher and Ordinary
German	Higher and Ordinary	Technology	Higher and Ordinary
Spanish	Higher and Ordinary	Latin	Higher and Ordinary
Italian	Higher and Ordinary	Ancient Greece	Higher and Ordinary
Art, Craft and Design	Higher and Ordinary	Classical Studies	Higher and Ordinary
Music	Higher and Ordinary	Hebrew Studies	Higher and Ordinary
Science	Higher and Ordinary	Religious Education	Higher and Ordinary
Home Economics	Higher and Ordinary	Civic, Social and Political Education	Common

**Table 6.2:** Junior Certificate Subject Choices

Subjects are normally studied at either Ordinary or Higher Level whilst Irish, English and mathematics, can also be studied at Foundation Level. The examination incorporates written tests in all subjects except Art, Craft and Design. There are optional oral examinations in the subjects Irish, French, German, Italian and Spanish. There are practical examinations in Art, Craft and Design, Music, Home Economics, and Metalwork (Higher Level only). There is Practical Course Work in Art, Craft and Design, Materials technology (Wood), Home Economics, Religious Education, Metalwork, Environmental and Social Studies, Civic, Social and Political Education, Technology, Science, and Science with Local Studies. Results of the Junior Certificate examination subjects are given in the form of grades. In addition to the subjects that are assessed as part of the Junior Certificate Examination, the junior cycle also includes a number of subjects that are integral to the curriculum, but are not formally assessed in this way. The inclusion of these subjects in the curriculum ensures that students receive a broad, balanced education. Non-examination subjects at junior cycle include Physical Education, Social, Personal and Health Education and Computer Studies.

At the end of senior cycle, students may opt for one of three variations of the Leaving Certificate examination. Students who have followed the Leaving Certificate (Established) take the Leaving Certificate examination. Examinations are currently available in the following thirty-four subjects:

<b>Subject</b>	<b>Level</b>	<b>Subject</b>	<b>Level</b>
Irish	Higher, Ordinary and Foundation	Construction Studies	Higher and Ordinary
English	Higher and Ordinary	Design and Communication	Higher and Ordinary
Mathematics	Higher, Ordinary and Foundation	Engineering	Higher and Ordinary
History	Higher and Ordinary	Technology	Higher and Ordinary
Geography	Higher and Ordinary	Business	Higher and Ordinary
French	Higher and Ordinary	Accounting	Higher and Ordinary
German	Higher and Ordinary	Economics	Higher and Ordinary
Spanish	Higher and Ordinary	Agricultural Economics	Higher and Ordinary
Italian	Higher and Ordinary	Agricultural Science	Higher and Ordinary
Biology		Latin	
Chemistry		Ancient Greek	
Physics	Higher and Ordinary	Classical Studies	Higher and Ordinary
Physics and Chemistry		Hebrew Studies	
Applied Mathematics		Religious Education	
Art	Higher and Ordinary	Russian	Higher and Ordinary
Music	Higher and Ordinary	Japanese	Higher and Ordinary
Home Economics	Higher and Ordinary	Arabic	Common

**Table 6.3:** Leaving Certificate (Established) subject choices

In addition to the subjects listed above, the SEC provides examinations in any of the recognised languages of the European Union, where the status of the applicant/candidate is seen as appropriate. The examination incorporates written tests in all subjects. In addition, there are oral and aural tests in the subjects Irish, French, German, Italian, Spanish, Russian and Japanese. There are practical examinations in the subjects Engineering, Construction Studies, Art and Music. There is Practical Course Work in the subjects Engineering, Construction Studies, Agricultural Economics, Agricultural Science, History; Geography, Religious Education, Design and Communication Graphics, and Technology. The examination in Home Economics includes an element of assessed course work and also a Textile option.

In addition to the examinations taken by other students, students who follow the LCVP take an examination paper and submit a portfolio in the Link Modules. In keeping with the strong vocational aspect of the LCVP, the link modules are activity-based modules on enterprise education, preparation for work and work experience. Students who follow the LCA programme take a final examination and accumulate credits over the two years of study.

In case of students' concerns about their results in the State examinations, there is in place a system for the review of scripts by examination candidates, and a procedure whereby students can have their examinations re-assessed by different markers if they so wish. The reviewed results are made available quickly so that, for example, entry to third level college courses can be facilitated if required. Students may appeal the grade awarded for any subject; appeals have to be accompanied by a fee, which is refunded if the appeal is successful.

### *Special Education*

As mentioned in section 6.1.1, schools are expected to use a staged approach model of assessment and intervention in relation to pupils with special educational needs. The stages include:



- *Stage 1 Classroom Support*: an intervention process which is co-ordinated by the class teacher and carried out in the regular classroom
- *Stage 2 School Support*: an assessment and intervention process, which is usually coordinated by the learning-support/resource teacher working alongside the class teachers. Interventions at this stage are additional to those provided through classroom support
- *Stage 3 School Support Plus*: a process which is generally characterised by the involvement at the request of the school, of relevant external services in more detailed assessment and in the development of more focused intervention programmes. Such specialist advice may be sought from psychologists, paediatricians, speech and language therapists, audiologists. This level of intervention is designed to cater for children with complex and/or enduring needs whose progress is considered inadequate despite carefully planned interventions at the previous stages.

As part of Stage 3, psychologists from NEPS work in partnership with teachers, parents and students in identifying educational needs and supporting individual students through consultation and assessment. The responsibility is on the school to make the referral to the psychologist once it has followed the staged model. Normally psychological assessment is not considered until Stage 3. Parents/guardians are consulted at all stages of assessment and intervention.

When the relevant sections of the EPSEN Act 2004 are in operation, school assessment may take place as a precursor to the formal assessment of a student under the act or as part of continuous monitoring within the Individual Education Plan (IEP) planning process.

The requirements for a formal assessment under the EPSEN Act are that such an assessment will:

- include an evaluation and statement of the nature and extent of the child's disability and an evaluation and statement of the services the child will need so as to be able to participate in and benefit from education and reach his/her potential
- be carried out by persons considered suitable by the NCSE or Health Service Executive, which may include one or more of the following: a psychologist, a medical practitioner, the principal of the school the child is attending or a teacher of that school nominated by the principal, a social worker or a therapist
- conform to standards set by a body to be established by the Minister for Health and Children for determining standards for these assessments. The programme for implementing the EPSEN Act will take into account the capacity of the system to carry out assessment as described in the Act.

#### *Criteria for assessing pupils*

At primary level, the content of the Primary School Curriculum (NCCA, 1999) is the main reference for assessing pupils. Pupils are assessed in each area of the primary curriculum in terms of the knowledge, concepts, skills and, where appropriate, values that underpin the content of each curricular area. Standardised tests in English, mathematics and Irish also relate to the content of the Primary School Curriculum. These tests are not modified for pupils with special educational needs but are used to help identify those who may require learning support. The number of learning support hours allocated to a school is based on the number of pupils achieving scores at or below the 10<sup>th</sup> percentile in standardised tests. Meanwhile, pupils may be excluded from the tests if in the view of the school principal they have a learning or physical disability which would prevent them from attempting the test, or in the case of newcomer pupils, where their level of English is such that attempting such a test would be inappropriate.

At secondary level, assessment criteria have been developed for each subject that is taken in the Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate State examinations. These criteria are closely

linked with the syllabus for each subject and are usually an integral part of the discussion during the development of a new syllabus or course. For example, students sitting both the ordinary level and higher level Junior Certificate examination in English are assessed on their written composition skills, language awareness skills, reading comprehension skills, oral skills, aural skills and their ability to recall, discuss and creatively use their knowledge of texts and materials encountered in their English programme.

The range of skills assessed by the Leaving Certificate examination has been increasing over the years; there is assessment of not only knowledge-based skills but also practical skills, research skills, interpretation skills, oral and aural linguistic ability and creative skills across the spectrum of subjects offered. In the case of languages, assessment includes an oral, aural and written assessment component. The marking schemes that are used for the state examinations are available to the public at

<http://www.examinations.ie/index.php?l=en&mc=en&sc=ep&formAction=agree>

#### *Recording assessment results*

Apart from the regulatory requirements, it is considered good practice for schools to monitor the progress of students through the maintenance of assessment records. The NCCA assessment guidelines (NCCA, 2007) suggest that three records be maintained by primary schools: the teacher's day-to-day records, the pupil file and the report card. The Pupil File is used by teachers to record information on all aspects of the child's learning and development. It is an overview record that provides a concise educational history of the child's progress and achievement during the course of each school year. The Report Card is a summative record which allows for the recording of assessment information twice a year. Similarly, it is customary for secondary schools to maintain a student file and report cards. The NCCA guidelines also recommend that assessment information be recorded in a manner that is readily accessible and comprehensible to all relevant interests whether for reporting assessment information from teacher to teacher within the school, reporting to parents at the different stages of their children's primary school education, or for sharing assessment information between schools. While legislation does not specify the length of time for which pupils' assessment records should be stored, good practice (NCCA, 2007) suggests that schools should store this information until former pupils are twenty-one years.

#### *Reporting assessment results*

It is normal practice for schools to communicate feedback to parents during formal parent/teacher meetings and in written reports. Under the Data Protection Act (1998 & 2003), parents are entitled to the results for their children of any assessment tests that a school has administered. Primary schools are to report assessment results to parents twice during each school year, one of these events to include a written report, in the form of a report card, preferably at the end of the school year, the other to include a meeting or a meeting and a written report (NCCA, 2007). At secondary level, teachers and principals use ongoing assessments either at the end of topics or a school term to report to parents on students' progress and give advice both on subject options and on the level at which subjects are taken.

#### *6.1.3 Competencies to assess students and to use assessment results*

An evolving legislative framework including the Education Act 1998, the Data Protection Acts 1998 and 2003, and the EPSEN Act, 2007, underpins the assessment of students and use of assessment results in the education system.

The Education Act 1998 requires that schools regularly report the results of assessments to students and their parents. The Data Protection (Amendment) Act 2003 establishes parents' rights to regular information on the progress and achievement of their children under the Education Act. Section 9 (g) of the Education Act together with the Data Protection (Amendment) Act (2003) requires schools to ensure that parents of a student, or a student who has reached the age of eighteen years, have access to records kept by that school relating

to the progress of that student in his or her education. In addition, under the Data Protection Acts 1988 and 2003, parents have a right to all assessment information about their children in intelligible form and they have the right to know the source of the assessment information. Section 28 of the Education (Welfare) Act 2000 requires the principal of a school to pass on information regarding the welfare of a child to other professionals involved in supporting his/her education. The Education (Welfare) Act 2000 (Section 28) (Prescribed Bodies) Regulations 2005 ensures that information can be shared with other individuals and bodies who are involved in the child's education when the purpose of sharing the information is to monitor and further the child's learning. Such instances include the sharing of information with other schools to which students are transferring, the NCSE, the NEWB, DES inspectors and NEPS psychologists. The EPSEN Act defines the role of the NEPS and the assessment process for special educational needs students.

Guidance on the assessment of students and the use of assessment results are also contained in the prescribed curricula at both primary and secondary levels and circulars from the DES. Guidelines such as those on assessment at primary level (NCCA, 2007) and those on the inclusion of special needs students at secondary level (Inspectorate, Department of Education and Science, 2007c) help to clarify how mandatory requirements can be implemented in schools and classrooms.

The Primary School Curriculum (NCCA, 1999) provides a statement on appropriate assessment procedures and their use for each subject on the curriculum. The curriculum, however, gives limited guidance on the specific use or the relative importance that should be accorded to particular types of assessment and is largely silent on how assessment might be used to inform decision making at school level.

In contrast, the NCCA guidelines on assessment (NCCA, 2007) not only support primary teachers' knowledge and understanding of assessment but provide detailed, practical guidance to teachers on *how* to use a range of assessment approaches in order to provide a full picture of a child's achievement. They also provide guidance to schools on the development and implementation of an assessment policy. A copy of the assessment guidelines was sent to each primary teacher in early 2008. The issuing of Circular 00138/2006 clarified expectations in relation to the use of standardised tests in primary schools. As a follow up to this, primary teachers received national professional development input on the use of standardised testing as part of a range of assessment approaches.

At secondary level, assessment guidelines are published with each new syllabus and the accompanying teacher guidelines for individual subjects.

The NCCA has also contributed to the development of expertise in relation to AfL through its curriculum development projects with schools. As part of its work with groups of teachers in its Primary School Network, the NCCA is currently exploring how AfL approaches can be implemented in Irish primary classrooms. The NCCA has also designed materials that are intended to support teachers and schools at primary and secondary level who wish to expand their 'assessment toolkit' by exploring the potential of classroom-based assessment to improve students' motivation and learning. See

[http://www.ncca.ie/en/Curriculum\\_and\\_Assessment/Secondary\\_Education/Junior\\_Cycle/Assessment\\_for\\_Learning\\_AfL/](http://www.ncca.ie/en/Curriculum_and_Assessment/Secondary_Education/Junior_Cycle/Assessment_for_Learning_AfL/)

<http://www.action.ncca.ie/en/afl/primary-afl/sample-activities-teaching-methods>

The SEC has built capacity since its establishment in 2003 to provide assessments in all subjects for varying numbers of candidates. It uses contracted examiners, drafters and advising examiners mostly from the teaching profession to assist in its work. The SEC also publishes an annual report on its development and progress.

<http://www.examinations.ie/index.php?l=en&mc=au&sc=pb>

Marking conferences and consultations between examiners, managers and the teaching body ensure that the assessment procedures on a national scale are kept abreast of developments and opinion.

#### *6.1.4 Using student assessment results*

Four main uses of educational assessment are common to the primary and secondary sectors:

- provide information about/evaluate progress in learning
- communicate such assessment information to students and parents and to other relevant parties
- inform consequent teaching and learning
- inform provision for learners with special educational needs.

These uses of students' assessment results are in line with the summative and formative learning framework outlined above in 6.1.1 and with the following definitions of assessment:

Assessment is the process of gathering, recording, interpreting, using, and reporting information about a child's progress and achievement in developing knowledge, skills and attitudes. (NCCA, 2007)

Assessment is the process of gathering, recording, interpreting, using and reporting evidence of learning in individuals, groups or systems, which relies upon a number of instruments, one of which may be a test.

[http://www.ncca.ie/en/Curriculum\\_and\\_Assessment/Secondary\\_Education/Assessment/](http://www.ncca.ie/en/Curriculum_and_Assessment/Secondary_Education/Assessment/)

The use of assessment to inform teaching and learning may include the review of pedagogical approaches, the consolidation of students' learning and the provision of differentiated learning programmes for individual or groups of students. In relation to special education needs provision, assessment is used to identify pupils that may require additional learning support, to inform consultation with the school's NEPS psychologist and to assist in the identification of students who may need to be referred to an outside professional or agency for assessment or direct intervention. The aim of specialist assessments including psychological assessments is to identify the specific difficulties of those with special educational needs and to determine the extent to which a pupil is entitled to special needs resources such as resource teaching hours or level of access to SNAs.

In addition to the above, teachers at secondary level may typically use assessment information to establish baseline data in relation to a student's attainments in specific subjects and to identify students for placement in class groups. Schools may also base annual awards for students on their internal end-of-term or end-of-year examination or assessment. As established in legislation (see 6.1.3), the provision of feedback about pupils' progress and achievement to relevant parties is a key use of assessment information.

One of the main uses of the results of the two State examinations at secondary level is certification. In addition, the Leaving Certificate is regarded nationwide as the benchmark for exit qualifications from secondary school for a cohort of over 50,000 students per year. The Junior Certificate is not a high-stakes examination, nor is it a major qualification at present in the employment market, but the results may impact on the type of Leaving Certificate programme that the student will follow in terms of the type of programme studied, subject choice and the level at which the subject is studied for the Leaving Certificate. By way of contrast, the Leaving Certificate is considered to be a high-stakes examination as the results determine selection for entry to higher education, or gaining a qualification that will assist in

gaining employment. It is also customary for parents to seek information on how a school performs in the state examinations when considering a school for their children.

The SEC publishes results for an examination for all candidates on the same day. Schools analyse their own results, subject associations analyse results for their subject, the national assessment statistics are published in the national media, and usually a national and local debate takes place as a result. Later on, the Chief Examiner for a subject publishes a report which provides an overview of the performance of candidates in the examinations and a detailed analysis of the standards of answering. Results are not published on a school-by-school basis, so there is no school 'league table' of school performance. This remains a live debate in the media, but there does not appear to be a large-scale public demand for such a development. Although the Minister for Education and Skills does not permit publication of examination data for individual schools, the media publishes league tables based on the percentage of pupils each school sends to third level colleges and on the progression rates to high-points courses respectively.

## **6.2 Implementation of student assessment**

While there are positive elements in relation to assessment practice, there is scope for further development in terms of the implementation of key aspects of the assessment policy framework such as effective use of assessment as a formative tool and systematic reporting of assessment information to parents.

### *Primary*

At primary level, Inspectorate evaluations (for example, Department of Education and Science 2005b, 2005c, 2007a) have identified four main weaknesses in relation to the implementation of student assessment:

- a dependency on the informal use of teacher observation as an assessment tool
- limited focus on learning priorities and outcomes
- limited use of assessment modes to provide information on the outcomes of learning
- limited use of assessment data for formative purposes.

Assessment, particularly standardised assessment, appears to operate as a stand-alone activity in many primary schools, and assessment data seems to be regarded more as a record of pupils' attainment rather than as a means of informing ways to improve and support their learning.

The reporting of assessment information also presents challenges in primary schools. In some instances, reporting practice appears to run counter to official policy that schools should provide information to parents about their children's performance in standardised tests and to the legal right of parents to access information about their child's progress. One survey that was commissioned by the NCCA (Hall et al, 2008) showed that one in six schools do not provide parents with a written report. Another survey (INTO, 2010) showed that the results of standardised tests are not reported to parents in 21% of schools; in 56% only verbal feedback is provided. Neither is it clear that parents of pupils at primary level are getting accurate information about their children's progress. One of the findings of the 2009 national assessments in English and mathematics (Eivers et al, 2010) was that the parents of the most academically challenged children had the least understanding of how their children were achieving in school. Just over 56% of sixth class pupils rated as good at reading by their parents could display only the most basic reading skills.

### *Secondary*

While the examinations system retains credibility because of the efficiency, objectivity and transparency of its administration processes and the expertise that teachers have accumulated in preparing students for state examinations, there is an ongoing debate nationally on the current approaches to assessment at secondary level. Among the concerns raised is the fitness

for purpose of the examinations system in terms of assessing the skills that students need for the future, the pressure that the high stakes Leaving Certificate puts on students and the proportionately small numbers that take science subjects or mathematics at higher level in the State examinations, especially at Leaving Certificate level.

The implementation of assessment for learning approaches has had a modicum of success as seen in the AfL initiatives that the NCCA carried out in a small number of secondary schools. Teachers who were involved in phase 1 of the initiative (NCCA 2005a) reported that there was greater involvement by students in the teaching and learning cycle, that involvement in AfL was a positive support for their teaching and that there was a positive effect on the student-teacher relationship in the classroom. Teachers also reported that they had been encouraged to reflect on and to make changes to their practice, that they were concentrating more on the manner in which material was presented to students and on different possibilities for engagement with the content. The report of phase two of the initiative (NCCA 2005b) concluded that teachers were encouraged to adjust their teaching in the light of their observations of the work of their students, to introduce greater degrees of differentiated teaching, and to develop strategies that promote self-assessment in students. They reported that students' motivation was increased and that self-assessment was promoted.

Stakeholders take differing views on assessment developments at secondary level, and this adds to the currency of the ongoing debate. At the heart of some of the discussion lies the non-availability of further resources, given the economic situation at present. Views on the time taken to administer such assessments, diverse assessment techniques, the need for continuing professional development, and elements such as ICT also contribute to the debate. For example, there has been great enthusiasm in some quarters for the introduction of second modes of assessment, such as projects, portfolios and research studies, in State examinations, which have been successfully introduced for some subjects. However, this has been accompanied by concern about timescales, resources, further workloads for students and teachers, and the model that may emerge.

There is general acceptance of the role of centralised national State examinations as a means to assess students' performance and to determine an order of merit for entry to further education and third-level courses, but there are many views about how the system might be modernised or de-centralised. Standardised tests, especially of the international variety, are generally well received by education stakeholders. Ireland's performance in such tests attracts strong media attention and much time and space is given to analysing the outcomes, especially in relation to Ireland's performance vis-à-vis other countries.

### **6.3 Policy initiatives**

The DES literacy and numeracy and numeracy strategy (Department of Education and Skills, 2011b) further develops the student assessment framework by its proposal to extend the mandating of standardised tests of literacy and numeracy to four points of compulsory schooling, three at primary level and one at secondary level. The strategy also proposes that schools be required to report to parents (through written school reports and parent-teacher interviews) in clear terms about how students are achieving compared to the norm for children of their age.

As evidenced in the work of the NCCA, policy initiatives in recent years have focused on the promotion of AfL approaches in primary schools and their consideration as part of the review of the junior cycle in secondary schools.

There is ongoing debate at secondary level about the way forward in relation to the content of programmes and assessment methods. For example, there has been an increasing emphasis on the assessment of a greater variety of skills at secondary level, not just knowledge but also competences such as critical thinking, engagement with learning, social development and

communication skills. The NCCA's work in developing a key skills framework for senior cycle education (NCCA, 2009) is one facet of this. The skills framework comprises information processing, communicating, being personally effective, working with others, and critical and creative thinking.



**Figure 6.2:** Senior Cycle Key Skills Framework (NCCA, 2009)

This framework is seen as the basis for further development, and is also being considered as part of the review of Junior Cycle programme as a template for looking at key skills for junior cycle education. The review of the junior cycle has included a re-examination of the purpose, format and future of the Junior Certificate examination taken at the end of third year in secondary school (age 14/15). The NCCA proposed new ideas for curriculum and assessment at junior cycle (NCCA, 2010b) and following public consultation stage, has proposed changes to the Junior Cycle programme to the Minister for Education and Skills (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2011). The discussion document offers ideas about why junior cycle education should change and how the junior cycle should change, and suggests a number of pathways towards change, each of which raises questions for discussion and debate. See

[http://www.ncca.ie/en/Curriculum\\_and\\_Assessment/Secondary\\_Education/Junior\\_Cycle/Junior\\_cycle\\_developments/](http://www.ncca.ie/en/Curriculum_and_Assessment/Secondary_Education/Junior_Cycle/Junior_cycle_developments/)

Other changes at secondary level in the content and approaches to assessment have been linked intrinsically to ongoing changes in syllabuses. For example, the Junior Certificate syllabuses for a number of subjects including English, music, home economics have been rebalanced to focus on learning outcomes. These are still in draft form but available on the NCCA website. See

[http://www.ncca.ie/en/Curriculum\\_and\\_Assessment/Secondary\\_Education/Junior\\_Cycle/Syllabus\\_change/rebalanced\\_syllabuses.html](http://www.ncca.ie/en/Curriculum_and_Assessment/Secondary_Education/Junior_Cycle/Syllabus_change/rebalanced_syllabuses.html)



A significant example of curricular and assessment reform in recent years at secondary level is Project Maths, a curriculum and assessment project in mathematics that began in 2008 (Department of Education and Skills, 2010d). The project involves a phased change in the mathematics syllabus at junior cycle and senior cycle, with a corresponding incremental change in the examinations. The introduction started with a group of twenty-four schools and has been implemented nationally since September 2010, when all schools commenced the first of three phases of changes in the mathematics syllabuses. See [http://www.ncca.ie/en/Curriculum\\_and\\_Assessment/Secondary\\_Education/Project\\_Maths/Project.html](http://www.ncca.ie/en/Curriculum_and_Assessment/Secondary_Education/Project_Maths/Project.html)

The NCCA also continues to develop and analyse new ways of looking at elements in the senior cycle curriculum and a number of curricular and assessment developments are currently being considered. For example, the NCCA has developed some ‘Short Courses’ of approximately half the length of standard Leaving Certificate syllabus subjects in various areas of senior cycle education such as psychology and in entrepreneurship. Transition Units (TUs) are new curriculum components under development at senior cycle as part of the Transition year programme, which is an optional year between junior cycle and senior cycle. These units, which are designed as 45-hour courses, are developed by schools or agencies working with schools. The TUs are currently in use in some schools and it is intended that, in the future, all schools will include a variety of TUs as part of their transition year programme. The means of assessing such courses is an integral part of their development, and while the ‘Short Courses’ could in time become part of the centrally assessed Leaving Certificate, the TUs are designed more for local assessment and validation.

#### **6.4 Conclusion**

The overall framework for student assessment at primary and secondary levels is characterised by a lively debate about the merits of summative and formative assessment. While summative assessment has predominated particularly at secondary level, formative assessment and more recently AfL has gained increasing currency as a concept for consideration by schools and teachers.

A number of issues remain to be resolved regarding the effective use of these approaches and their integration both with each other and in the overall evaluation and assessment framework. Teachers’ use of summative assessment, particularly at primary level, has perhaps been limited by a lack of clarity about standards which, in turn, tends to cast doubts about the validity and reliability of such assessments. This is also true to lesser extent at secondary level where, standards have been determined by the expectations underpinning the state examinations system. There is not a clear consensus in relation to standards at other stages of secondary education, or in areas that are not examined. The National Strategy for Literacy and Numeracy (Department of Education and Skills, 2011b) identifies the need to develop a national standards framework which will act as a benchmark for teachers’ summative assessments.

While the emergent new understandings regarding formative assessment are laudable, the implementation of such practice is at an early stage of development. There is, as yet, limited use of assessment to inform learning in Irish classrooms. The student assessment framework at primary level focuses on the use of assessment at the level of the individual pupil with limited use of assessment results at class and whole-school level. There also is limited connection between summative and formative assessment in practice as seen in the infrequent formative use of the results of standardised tests in schools. The challenge for the system is to combine the new understandings of how students learn together with the existing expertise in relation to summative assessment. For example, there is a need to strengthen the potential of summative assessment such as in the potential of standardised tests to be used formatively in classrooms and, indeed, at whole-school level.



There are some accountability procedures linking the school and parents in relation to student assessment. This can be seen in the requirement of schools to regularly evaluate pupils' learning, retain records of their learning and to share the outcomes of that assessment with parents including the outcomes of standardised testing at particular stages of compulsory schooling. However, there is evidence to show that many parents do not have a clear understanding about their children's progress, possibly due to the fact that they do not receive sufficient information about their children's progress at school. The policy measures in the literacy and numeracy strategy suggest a number of actions to address this gap including the mandatory administration of standardised tests at additional points of compulsory education and the reporting of the results in a meaningful way to parents.

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<http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/2001/en/act/pub/0008/index.html>

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[www.irishstatutebook.ie/2006/en/act/pub/0002/print.html](http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/2006/en/act/pub/0002/print.html)

### Websites in relation to primary and secondary schooling

Central Admissions Office	<a href="http://www.cao.ie">http://www.cao.ie</a>
Department of Education and Skills	<a href="http://www.education.gov.ie">http://www.education.gov.ie</a>
Educational Research Centre	<a href="http://www.erc.ie">http://www.erc.ie</a>
National Council for Curriculum and Assessment	<a href="http://www.ncca.ie">http://www.ncca.ie</a>
National Council for Special Education	<a href="http://www.ncse.ie">http://www.ncse.ie</a>
National Council for Technology in Education	<a href="http://www.ncte.ie">http://www.ncte.ie</a>
National Education Welfare Board	<a href="http://www.newb.ie">http://www.newb.ie</a>
Professional Development Service for Teachers	<a href="http://www.pdst.ie">http://www.pdst.ie</a>
Second Level Support Service	<a href="http://www.slss.ie">http://www.slss.ie</a>
Special Education Support Service	<a href="http://www.sess.ie">http://www.sess.ie</a>
State Examinations Commission	<a href="http://www.sec.ie">http://www.sec.ie</a>
The Teaching Council	<a href="http://teachingcouncil.ie">http://teachingcouncil.ie</a>
Youthreach	<a href="http://www.youthreach.ie">http://www.youthreach.ie</a>