

Irish National Teachers' Organisation
(INTO) Response To
The NI Assembly Education Committee on
Changes to Inspections
October 2015

into



Irish National Teachers' Organisation
Cumann Múinteoirí Éireann

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The Irish National Teachers' Organisation, (INTO) is the largest teachers' union in Ireland and presently represents around 7000 teachers in all educational sectors in Northern Ireland.

INTO has over the past number of years made various representations and responses in relation to inspections in Northern Ireland.

As such we welcome the opportunity to respond to the Education Committee's request for views on the effectiveness of the changes made to the school inspection process.

Revisions to some of the inspection descriptors

INTO welcomes the reduction of overall performance levels from six but believes four is still too many. INTO also welcomes the move away from one word labels but again feels that the performance level conclusions could have been reduced, there is no need for the first one about high level of capacity for sustained improvement. The second conclusion is sufficient and conclusions 3 and 4 could be condensed into a single one as the detail to be added in will differentiate between the requirements of each school to improve.

Changing the number of conclusions but keeping the same number of performance level descriptors has caused confusion among schools. The changing of the last 3 performance level descriptors is welcomed as in the words satisfactory, inadequate and unsatisfactory are no longer used, however the differentiation between outstanding, very good and good, still exists and INTO does not agree with these.

It remains to be seen whether these changes, which INTO believes are superficial, have any real effect on how inspection outcomes are viewed.

Changes to the Formal intervention Process

The changes to the FIP do not address the issues of why the school has been placed in FIP. In a recent inspection the initial outcome of the inspection was overturned by the Chief Inspector from the then 'satisfactory' to 'inadequate' and subsequently the DE placed the school in the FIP. The majority of issues to be addressed in this FIP were issues beyond the control of the school to address but no cognisance was taken by either the ETI or DE in determining the school as inadequate and placing them in FIP.

According to the DE and ETI the school will receive support when they are placed in FIP, but again there is a complete ignoring of the lack of resources available through the now EA to provide that support. The school I referred to earlier are severely stressed at the position they find themselves in, the reaction of parents and the lack of support they have received to date. This process is supposed to support school improvement yet all it is doing is causing further stress and difficulties to schools which are trying to address issues with no recognition of their situation and no support to properly address it.

The reduction of two ETI Follow-up Inspections to one is a misnomer as the second FUI has been replaced by an interim visit by ETI which is to all intents and purposes the same thing!

The INTO response to the DE consultation on proposed changes to the FIP stated that:

The school should be given time and appropriate support to address the issues raised before the follow up inspection but one visit should be sufficient. There should also not be any interim follow up visit from ETI as all visits from ETI currently are inspections.

The changing of the conclusions of overall effectiveness from six to four has been used by the DE to keep schools in FIP even if they are deemed to be 'satisfactory' in the old system. This process is simply about penalising schools, and not a process for school improvement. It needs to be reviewed properly in the context of school improvement, not just inspections, which have not been linked despite the recommendations of the Committee.

The development by ETI of a parents' panel

INTO is very concerned at the development of a parents' panel by ETI. On numerous occasions to date INTO has raised concerns about how schools and focus groups of teachers/principals etc. are selected by the ETI for various initiatives. INTO has also highlighted regularly to ETI that there is a lack of trust of ETI from the teaching and wider education community. For ETI to set up a panel of parents, gives cause for great concern and greater distrust.

INTO recognises the importance of parents in the education of their children but cannot condone a panel of parents selected by ETI, particularly in the absence of any information on what powers/responsibilities etc. this panel would have and the absence of a credible complaints procedure.

The piloting of joint lesson observation (including school leaders and ETI inspectors)

The piloting of joint lesson observations is seen by many schools as an additional level of inspection of teachers. If ETI was operating in a supportive school improvement role this may be viewed in a different light. However introducing this pilot in the absence of addressing the recommendation of the Education Committee to have a joint service is lip service and not of any significant support to schools.

The piloting of the inclusion of school leaders in all inspection and moderation meetings

INTO gave a cautious welcome to this initiative as a means in which the inspection process might become more transparent. INTO also cautioned in the early stages of the pilot that the schools being inspected all achieved good outcomes. The school leaders have to sign a confidentiality agreement to be included in the pilot. It has transpired in recent months that where challenges have been made to the inspectorate in relation to inspections and the school leaders are being vilified by the ETI for breaking that confidence clause. INTO fails to see the relevance of this as, if there are issues being discussed, which are relevant to a challenge by the school, the school leader would be failing in their duty to their school and governors if they did not reveal what they knew. The question also arises as why does the process have to be so confidential?

The use of Sustaining Improvement Inspections

The view among schools is that 'they are damned if they do and damned if they don't'!

With the new four conclusions only those schools which are identified as:

'The organisation demonstrates the capacity to identify and bring about improvement in the interest of all learners....' will not have a follow up visit from ETI. Given the nature of ETI visits currently and the levels of distrust from teachers and schools, this form of inspection is not an effective use of ETI resources. The resources would be better spent on supporting schools through the District Inspectors as identified by INTO and others during the Inquiry.

Other comments by INTO on issues which remain to be addressed by ETI

ETI Complaints Procedure

INTO remains very concerned that the ETI complaints procedure is not fit for purpose and requires independent oversight. According to their website, the ETI reviewed the complaints procedure recently, in September 2015, with apparently no real changes. There is still no appeals procedure in relation to school inspections. The previous and recently reviewed complaints procedure has no element of independent oversight. All complaints are still dealt with internally by the ETI with the Chief inspector being the final arbiter. There remains no independent appeal mechanism, despite repeated requests from INTO and NITC to this effect. They have also failed to address the recommendation of the Education Committee of the NI Assembly.