Quality Assurance in Early Childhood and School Education

Responsible Bodies

Early Childhood

The Department of Education and Skills (DES) operates a split system of governance with the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) in the implementation of Early Childhood Education. The DCYA is responsible, in the main, for pre-primary education while the DES has responsibility for primary education. While the legal starting age for primary school is 6 years, children as young as 4 years may enroll in primary schools.

The early childhood education and care sector is supported by Síolta, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education [1], and by Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework [2]. Both of these frameworks are published by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment.

The Síolta Quality Assurance Programme [3] (QAP), initially developed and published in 2006, is a schedule of nationally agreed quality principles, standards and components in clearly defined steps including self-assessment, action planning, quality development and evidence collection, portfolio building and validation. A mentor supports the early years’ service through the Síolta QAP while the quality ratings are further validated. The NCCA has also published an Aistear-Síolta Practice Guide [4] to better support children’s learning and development. Better Start [5] is a support service which provides advice and training to enable centres to apply and implement the frameworks. The Síolta QAP has been designed to provide structured, supported engagement for ECCE services. Although formal engagement with the Síolta QAP is voluntary, it is nevertheless a requirement of the free Pre-School Year scheme that participating services provide an appropriate programme of activities in early childhood care and education that adhere to the principles of Síolta.

The quality improvement agenda is being supported by the introduction of education-focused inspections since 2015. The first education-focused inspection reports [6] on ECCE settings were published in June 2016 on the Department of Education and Skills’ website. In August 2016, the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs established a National Collaborative Forum for the ECCE sector to facilitate engagement with key stakeholders on issues of concern and ongoing policy and delivery matters. A public consultation process on inspections began in May 2015, and this was followed by a pilot which started in September 2015 to finalise and test the model. A team of early years’ inspectors was recruited.

A public consultation on training and qualifications was undertaken in 2015 that led to the publication of an approved list of qualifications for practitioners in early years’ education in September 2015. In addition, funding has been made available and proposals have been invited from providers of
accredited courses in inclusive early education in the further and higher education and training sectors, to provide programmes to upskill practitioners with the necessary competences to provide for the needs of children with special needs.

Primary Education and Post-Primary Education

The Inspectorate is the division of the DES that is responsible for the evaluation of primary and post-primary schools and centres for education in accordance with Section 13 of the Education Act 1998. Inspectors also provide advice on a range of educational issues to school communities, policy makers in the Department and to the wider educational system. All inspectors are experienced teachers. Many have also worked as school principals, deputy principals or as advisors with school support services. Others have experience in curriculum design, the implementation of assessment practices, school management and educational research. The Inspectorate was placed on a statutory basis under the provisions of the Education Act 1998.

The Inspectorate:

- Provides an assurance of quality and public accountability in the education system;
- Carries out inspections in schools and centres for education;
- Conducts national evaluations;
- Promotes best practice and school improvement by advising teachers, principals and boards of management in schools;
- Publishes inspection reports on individual schools and centres for education;
- Reports on curriculum provision, teaching, learning and assessment generally in the educational system;
- Promotes the Irish language;
- Provides advice to policy makers in the Department of Education and Skills and to the wider educational system;
- Provides oral feedback to the school community at the end of these inspections and provides a printed report which is published on the DES website.

The inspection of publicly-funded schools by professional inspectors began in Ireland as early as 1816 and became a key feature of the National Education System (the officially funded elementary education system) on its establishment in 1831. The role and function of the Inspectorate has developed and adapted over the intervening years, but its core functions – inspecting the quality of schooling, advising teachers and school management, and advising Ministers and other officials on educational policy – have remained constant.

A teacher or a board of management affected by an inspection may seek a review of the inspection using the procedures outlined in *Procedures for Review of Inspections on Schools and Teachers* [7]. As part of a process of quality assuring its work, the Inspectorate now routinely invites principals, teachers, chairpersons of boards of management or their nominees and chairpersons of parents’ associations or their nominees, to complete a survey of their views on the whole-school evaluation (WSE) or whole-school evaluation, management, leadership and learning (WSE-MLL) process.

Since 1998, the Inspectorate has published a range of reports and other publications to advise and support schools, policy makers and the wider educational community. The main types of publications are:

- National reports on different aspects of the school system. These reports provide findings and recommendations arising from analysis of school evaluations and from the research conducted on specific themes or subjects. They often include examples of best practice and can be used by schools to improve teaching and learning;

- Guides and information notes about how to carry out inspections: these provide information on different types of inspection such as Whole School Evaluation (WSE), subject inspection, incidental inspection;

- Inspectorate Code of Practice which sets out the standards for carrying out work;

- Procedures for Review of Inspections which can be used by a teacher or a Board of Management who is dissatisfied with an inspection;

- Publications to support school self-evaluation;

- Oideas: the academic journal of the Department of Education and Skills. Oideas has been published on a regular basis since 1968.

Over eighty publications [8] by the Inspectorate are available on the DES website.

Some of the work of evaluation in the education system is assisted and often carried out by the Educational Research Centre [9] (ERC). The ERC is an independent research institution and is partly funded by the Higher Education Authority [10] and the DES. It works at all levels of the education system, from pre-school to third level. In recent years, the ERC has been involved in a number of national and international studies such as *Breaking the Cycle, Early Start*, analyses of the Junior and Leaving Certificate Examinations, assessments in relation to literacy and numeracy, and the Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) scheme. In international terms, the ERC has been, and is involved in, ongoing work on the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) the Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and the Progress in International Reading
Literacy Survey (PIRLS). The ERC also produces an educational journal, the Irish Journal of Education [11].

The NCCA also plays a role in the evaluation of the education system. The Statutory Council of the NCCA is appointed by the Minister for Education and Skills for a three-year term. Its twenty-five members represent teachers, school managers, parents, business, trades unions and other educational interests. Other members include representatives of the department of education and skills, the State Examinations Commission and one nominee of the Minister. The Minister appoints the Chairperson. The functions of the NCCA and its statutory remit in relation to evaluation are outlined in Section 41 of the Education Act, 1998. In addition to its work of developing the curriculum at primary and post-primary level, the NCCA is required by the Minister for Education and Skills to publish a detailed annual review with recommendations 'on standards of knowledge and skills to be attained, by age-levels, or other suitable criteria, and the methods of assessing performance relative to such standards'. Structures within the NCCA are currently under review.

Other groups that have responsibility for aspects of evaluation include the Central Policy Unit of the Department and the State Examinations Commission (SEC). The Central Policy Unit, which has a lead role in coordinating the Department’s policy development, is responsible for coordinating value-for-money assessments for the Department. The SEC has responsibility for the development, assessment, accreditation and certification of post-primary examinations. It also provides statistics on the participation and achievement of students in the State examinations.

The national generic, integrated and cross-sectoral support service, the Professional Development Service for Teachers [12] (PDST), also plays a key role in facilitating and promoting quality assurance in schools. The establishment of the organisation was synonymous with the amalgamation and restructuring of a number of stand-alone services in a range of pedagogical, curricular and educational areas. The aim of the PDST is to provide high-quality professional development and support that empowers teachers and schools to provide the best possible education for all pupils/students. In addition to providing support in response to schools' identified needs, it responds to needs identified following a Whole School Evaluation (WSE) or in relation to Section 24 of the Education Act (1998). Its mission is to support teachers as reflective practitioners by providing a range of professional development opportunities and supports that enable teacher learning, collaboration and evidence-based practice with an emphasis on:

- Curriculum and Pedagogy;
- Learning and Teaching Methodologies;
- School Improvement and School Self-evaluation;
- School Leadership, Culture and Leading Learning;
- Pupil/Student and Teacher Welfare;
- Information and Communications Technology.

The overall goal for the PDST is to be widely acknowledged as an innovative, responsive and trusted
provider of continuing professional development and support for teachers and schools. The PDST team comprises seconded, practising teachers augmented by team leaders, local facilitators and associate trainers.

Approaches and Methods for Quality Assurance

Early Childhood

Early Years Education-focused Inspections (EYEIs) are conducted by early years inspectors from the Inspectorate of the DES in a diverse range of early years settings nationally. A guide to the inspections, A Guide to Early-Years Education-focused Inspection (EYEI) in Early-Years Settings Participating in the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Programme (2016) [13], is available on the DES and DCYA websites.

The new inspections build on existing curriculum and quality assurance frameworks for pre-schools, most notably, Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework [2], and Síolta: the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education [1]. During the inspections, the DES early-years inspectors monitor the quality of the educational experiences provided for children in pre-schools and give feedback and practical advice to practitioners about how provision can be improved.

During these inspections, the quality of the nature, range and appropriateness of the early educational experiences for children participating in the ECCE Programme are evaluated. The main activity of an EYEI inspection is the observation, by the inspector, of the processes and practices relating to children’s learning in one or more learning rooms or areas in the early-years setting.

At the end of each inspection the early-years practitioners and the owners/managers (where available) are provided with feedback on the quality of educational provision in the setting. Subsequently, a written report is sent to the pre-school inspected outlining the inspection findings and providing advice as to how educational provision in the setting can be developed further or improved. The inspection report is published on the DES and DCYA websites.

The Síolta Quality Assurance Programme [3] (QAP) has been designed to promote quality improvement in early years’ settings by encouraging the development of environments which are characterised by:

- Democracy and respect;
- Partnership (with children, staff, parents, families and community);
- Reflection in and on practice;
- Creativity and research;
- Documentation and planning.

The goal of the Síolta QAP is to foster the development of an organisational culture which empowers both the setting and the staff to take ownership of and drive quality improvement as a continuous feature of everyday practice.
Validation is final stage in the Síolta QAP, where a service’s internal self-assessed ratings and accompanying portfolio of evidence are reviewed by an external, expert validator. The Síolta Validator is selected for this role based on their expertise and experience relevant to the delivery of ECEC services. Typically, a validator will have achieved at least a bachelor degree level qualification in early childhood care and education or cognisant discipline or equivalent and will have at least three years practical experience of working in an ECEC setting.

The validation process is completed when a setting is issued with a validation certificate detailing the ratings they have achieved for each Síolta Standard. This certification may be displayed in the ECEC setting. The Validation Certificate has a currency of three years from the date of issue. At the end of this period the ECEC setting must re-submit a Síolta Quality Portfolio for renewal of their validation certificate. Substantial change to the operation of the ECEC setting in advance of the renewal date will also require resubmission. These conditions include:

- Change of management/ownership/lead staff;
- Change of purpose;
- Change of premises.

Primary Education and Post-Primary Education

In accordance with Section 13 of the Education Act, 1998 the Department of Education and Skills is the key agency in evaluating the education system and in conducting school evaluation. The Inspectorate conducts an annual programme of inspection of primary schools, post-primary schools and centres for education.

The Inspectorate carries out different types of inspections in schools and centres for education. The main forms of inspection currently are:

- **Whole School Evaluations** [15] (WSE) in primary and post-primary schools: This involves evaluation of primary and post-primary schools. In primary schools, the WSE team or individual inspector evaluates and reports on the operation of the school under the areas of school management, school planning and school self-evaluation, teaching, learning and pupil achievement, and support for pupils. In post-primary schools, the WSE team evaluates and reports on the operation of the school under the areas of school management, school planning, curriculum provision, learning and teaching and support for students. These areas of inquiry reflect the structure of Looking at Our School: An Aid to Self-Evaluation in Primary Schools [16] and Looking at Our School: An Aid to Self-Evaluation in Second-Level Schools [17];

- Whole-School Evaluation: Management, Leadership and Learning (WSE-MLL) in primary and post-primary schools reports on the quality of teaching and the quality of pupils’ learning, the quality of support for pupils’ well-being and on the quality of management and leadership in a school. It affirms good practice and makes recommendations, where appropriate, to aid the further development of educational provision in the school;

- **Subject inspections** [18] in post-primary schools: evaluate the provision for individual subject
areas under the headings of whole-school provision and support, planning and preparation;

- **Early-Years Education-focused Inspections (EYEIs)** [6] are carried out in early-years services participating in the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Programme;

- **Programme evaluations** [19] in post-primary schools: are designed to evaluate the effectiveness of programmes such as the Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP), the Transition Year (TY) programme, LCA and LCVP. Programme evaluations examine the quality of 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;

- **Evaluations of centres for education** [20]: Inspectors conduct evaluations of Youthreach Centres. (The Youthreach programme seeks to provide early school leavers (15-20 years) with the knowledge, skills and confidence required to participate fully in society and progress to further education, training and employment;

- **Evaluation of Action Planning for Improvement in DEIS schools** [21];

- **Whole College Evaluations in colleges offering Teagasc courses** [22];

- **Inspection of Schools at High Support Units, Special Care Units and Children Detention Schools** [23];

- **Specialised or thematic inspections** [24] in schools and centres for education;

- **Inspection of probationary teachers** [25];

- **Incidental (unannounced) inspections** [26] in primary and post-primary schools and in centres for education: These are unannounced inspections that an inspector carries out in primary or post-primary schools. Most incidental inspections focus on aspects of teaching, learning, pupil achievement and supports for pupils, and are of one day duration;

- **Follow-Through Inspections** [27] evaluate the progress a school has made on implementing recommendations made in an earlier inspection where a written report has been published or issued to the school. The format of the follow-through inspection is determined by the recommendations in the published or issued report. The process allows for sufficient flexibility to gather evidence relating to the progress made on implementing some or all of the main recommendations in the original inspection report. At the end of the inspections, oral feedback about the findings is provided and a written report is published on the DES website;

- **Curriculum Evaluations in Primary Schools** [28] are a focused evaluation of a particular subject of the Primary School Curriculum, such as Mathematics, History or Social Personal and Health Education. During a Curriculum Evaluation, three main aspects of the school's provision for that
subject are evaluated: the quality of the pupils' learning in the subject, how the school supports pupils' learning in that subject and how the schools plans for that subject. Curriculum Evaluations generally take between one and two days and during the evaluation the inspector visits classrooms, interacts with pupils, examines aspects of their work, meets with some teachers and reviews a limited number of relevant school documents. They provide oral feedback at the end of these evaluations and the school receives a written report;

- Evaluations of Provision for Pupils with Special Educational Needs in Primary Schools [29];

- Inspections of Courses in Irish-language Colleges [30].

Whilst the models vary, they all seek to provide a balanced external perspective on the quality of the work of the school or centre, taking cognisance of the context in which the schools are working. All incorporate interviews with key staff (such as the principal, head of department and teachers), the scrutiny of school planning and self-review documentation, substantial periods of observation of teaching and learning, interaction by inspectors with students in classrooms and other settings, and the examination of students' work. Most of the models also incorporate interviews with the board of management of the school or centre, with learners and with parents of students. Following the evaluation, detailed oral feedback is provided by the inspectors to the principal and staff and, in most cases, to the board of management.

**The Inspectorate's Quality Continuum**

Inspectors describe the quality of provision in the school using the Inspectorate’s quality continuum which is shown below. The quality continuum provides examples of the language used by inspectors when evaluating and describing the quality the school’s provision of each area. The use of the continuum below was introduced in September 2016.

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<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Example of descriptive terms</th>
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<tr>
<td>Very Good</td>
<td><strong>Very good</strong> applies where the quality of the areas evaluated is of a very high standard. The very few areas for improvement that exist do not significantly impact on the overall quality of provision. For some schools in this category the quality of what is evaluated is <strong>outstanding</strong> and provides an example for other schools of exceptionally high standards of provision.</td>
<td>Very good; of a very high quality; very effective practice; highly commendable; very successful; few areas for improvement; notable; of a very high standard. Excellent; outstanding; exceptionally high standard, with very significant strengths; exemplary</td>
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<tr>
<td>Grade</td>
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<td><strong>Good</strong></td>
<td>Applies where the strengths in the areas evaluated clearly outweigh the areas in need of improvement. The areas requiring improvement impact on the quality of pupils’ learning. The school needs to build on its strengths and take action to address the areas identified as requiring improvement in order to achieve a very good standard.</td>
<td>Good; good quality; valuable; effective practice; competent; useful; commendable; good standard; some areas for improvement</td>
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<td><strong>Satisfactory</strong></td>
<td>Applies where the quality of provision is adequate. The strengths in what is being evaluated just outweigh the shortcomings. While the shortcomings do not have a significant negative impact they constrain the quality of the learning experiences and should be addressed in order to achieve a better standard.</td>
<td>Satisfactory; adequate; appropriate provision although some possibilities for improvement exist; acceptable level of quality; improvement needed in some areas</td>
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<td><strong>Fair</strong></td>
<td>Applies where, although there are some strengths in the areas evaluated, deficiencies or shortcomings that outweigh those strengths also exist. The school will have to address certain deficiencies without delay in order to ensure that provision is satisfactory or better.</td>
<td>Fair; evident weaknesses that are impacting on pupils’ learning; less than satisfactory; experiencing difficulty; must improve in specified areas; action required to improve</td>
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<td><strong>Weak</strong></td>
<td>Applies where there are serious deficiencies in the areas evaluated. Immediate and coordinated whole-school action is required to address the areas of concern. In some cases, the intervention of other agencies may be required to support improvements.</td>
<td>Weak; unsatisfactory; insufficient; ineffective; poor; requiring significant change, development or improvement; experiencing significant difficulties;</td>
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All reports arising from WSE, subject and programme inspections, and evaluations of centres for education are published on the Department’s website in accordance with the procedures outlined in Guidelines for the Publication of School Inspection Reports, published by the Inspectorate, 2017. Schools are provided with an opportunity to verify the factual content of an inspection report and to
submit a school response setting out the school’s plans to address the report’s recommendations. This response is published along with the inspection report on the Department’s website. The provision of reports in this way began in 2006. Publication of the reports means that comprehensive, evidence-based information is available to the whole school community and this initiative has been warmly welcomed by parents’ groups. Since June 2006, over 11,000 reports have been published covering the work of schools and centres for education. These do not include incidental visits or visits to probationary teachers.

These external evaluation processes make an important contribution to quality assurance of the education system by affirming good practice and by providing advice from inspectors (who are experienced practitioners and evaluators) on how the school can improve the quality of the educational experience that it offers to students. This evaluation work also acts as an accountability measure: the report helps to ensure that the management, the patron authority of the school and the department obtain an independent evaluation of the school’s work, and the publication of the report means that parents, the wider community and the public as a whole receive high quality information about quality and standards in the school.

The Inspectorate also seeks to enable schools, management authorities, teacher educators, teacher support personnel and policy makers in the system to learn lessons that emerge from evaluating the work of schools in a number of ways:

- Publishing the individual inspection reports completed on each school and centre;
- Analysing data from the general inspection programme to identify general trends and areas that require development and publishing these in composite national reports;
- Conducting thematic evaluations on specific subjects or aspects of the work of schools and centres.

The publication of school inspection reports means that they also become available to other schools, school leaders, those involved in the management of schools and other professionals. The Inspectorate has encouraged members of teacher professional networks, principals’ groups and others to examine these reports so that they may learn lessons about how their own schools or centres could be improved.

**Composite National Reports**

The Inspectorate disseminates general lessons from school inspection reports on individual schools to other schools and the system generally through the publication of composite reports on various aspects of educational provision. In these publications, the findings from a large number of reports from individual schools and centres – for example, 60-70 reports on the teaching of a specific subject – are discussed and the general patterns explored. The chapters of these publications contain a summary of ‘good practice’ and ‘areas of concern’ which are designed to assist boards of management, teachers and school principals in the process of reviewing and improving their own work. Examples of these reports produced recently include:

- [Education of Children in Detention and Care](#)
Inspectors engage regularly with teacher professional networks where they have opportunities to promote the good practice identified in these reports.

**Thematic Evaluation Projects**

In addition to its mainstream evaluation activity, the Inspectorate undertakes a number of in-depth specialised or thematic evaluation projects each year. These evaluations examine the quality of selected subjects, educational programmes or services across a sample of schools. These evaluations usually incorporate a considerable research element and the evidence base, while similar to that for whole-school evaluations, generally incorporates other elements such as data from teacher, parent and student questionnaires.

An overall report is prepared that sets out the main trends and recommendations for service improvement and policy development. Some of the recommendations provide advice for teachers, school leaders and management while others are intended for policy makers and relevant agencies. The report is disseminated to schools and key personnel throughout the system. Published thematic reports include ICT in Schools and Irish in the Primary School.

**National Council for Curriculum and Assessment**

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) is a statutory body of the Department of Education and Skills. The twenty-five members of the governing council are appointed by the Minister for a three-year term. The members represent the partners in education, industry and trade union interests, parents’ organisations and other educational interests. The Council also includes one nominee each of the Minister for Education and Skills and the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs. The Minister for Education and Skills appoints the Chairperson. The Council is supported in its work by three boards and a number of development groups. Members of these represent similar stakeholders to council. The day-to-day work of the Council is led by the Chief Executive Officer supported by a full-time executive staff.

The NCCA advises the Minister for Education and Skills on:

- Curriculum and assessment for early childhood education, primary and post-primary schools;
- Assessment procedures used in schools and examinations on subjects which are part of the curriculum.

This advice is developed through research, deliberation, consultation and networks. Within its statutory remit in relation to evaluation, the NCCA published a review of results on the Junior Certificate Examination and on the Leaving Certificate Examination annually. This has now been replaced by a thematic or longitudinal analysis of results. The Inspectorate of the Department of Education and Skills uses such reviews of results to identify and maintain standards particularly in
relation to new syllabus content. In addition, the NCCA has been involved in Junior Cycle and Senior Cycle review in post-primary schools in recent years. As part of this review, the NCCA engaged in a consultation process with representatives from Dáil na nÓg (the National Youth Parliament of Ireland) during which the reform of the Junior Cycle was debated.

The Senior Cycle is currently undergoing a significant phase of review following a consultative process with partners and online questionnaires, briefings for organisations, seminars, senior cycle forums and school-based research, a series of conferences, meetings and soundings with interested parties and the public.

The Council sets out its work priorities in a three-year Strategic Plan (2015-2018) [37]. These priorities contribute to the overall vision of leading innovation in education for learning, living and working in a changing world. While the NCCA is not responsible for implementing curriculum change, it supports educational change in early childhood settings and in schools by developing a range of support materials such as examples of practice, online toolkits and planning resources, and by working with those introducing new developments to practitioners and teachers.

**Role of Assessment Data and Examinations in Quality Assurance**

Under Article 22 of the Education Act, 1998 schools are obliged to ‘regularly evaluate students and periodically report the results of the evaluation to the students and their parents.’ In the primary school sector, teachers use a variety of methods to facilitate both ‘assessment of learning’ and ‘assessment for learning’.

Schools were requested to implement a range of measures relating to the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy in 2011. These measures included the implementation of standardised testing in English reading and Mathematics at three points in the primary school cycle together with the reporting of the information from these tests to parents, and reporting aggregate results to boards of management and to the department of education and skills for 2nd, 4th and 6th classes since 2012. The tests are normed for the Irish population in both English-medium and Irish-medium schools. The results from these tests, administered at school level, should also inform school self-evaluation (SSE), ongoing school and classroom planning, reflective practices and school improvement plans. The data reported to the department of education and skill is utilised to inform national educational policy for literacy and numeracy, and to identify ways of improving the performance of the school system.

In addition to using the data to track pupils’ progress, inform programmes of learning and assist with the allocation of learning support resources, schools are increasingly expected to analyse the data at whole-school level. They are encouraged to use the data to compare their performance at school level with national norms and in both the setting and monitoring of targets towards improving overall attainment in literacy and numeracy.

National Assessments of Mathematics and English Reading are conducted by the Educational Research Centre (ERC) on behalf of the Department every five years. The main functions of the National Assessments are to assess national standards, identify factors related to performance on the tests, and inform policy. The ERC has been involved in implementing and reporting on National Assessments of Mathematics and English Reading (NAMER) since the 1980s on behalf of the DES. In Spring 2014, over 8,000 pupils in second and sixth classes in a representative national sample of 150 primary schools completed secure tests of English reading and mathematics and responded to pupil questionnaires, while their principals, class teachers and parents also completed questionnaires (see Shiel, Kavanagh & Millar, 2015).

In 2010, the National Assessments of Mathematics and English Reading were implemented in a
representative sample of Irish-medium schools and comparisons were drawn between the performance of pupils in schools in general (based on the 2009 assessment) and in Gaeltacht schools and Gaelscoileanna (Irish-medium schools). A summary report on the National Assessments in Irish-medium Schools (NAIMS) was published in English and Gaeilge in 2011 (Shiel, Gilleece, Clerkin & Millar) and a main report, in both languages, was published in 2012 (Gilleece, Shiel, Clerkin & Millar).

The assessment approaches recommended for post-primary schools include formal methods, informal methods, and diagnostic methods. Formal methods of assessment include standardised, criterion-referenced and certain diagnostic tests. The Literacy and Numeracy Strategy requires standardised testing in Mathematics and English being administered to all second-year students.

State examinations, and end-of-term school examinations are also formal methods of assessment. The Department has operated the State examination system at two points in the post-primary education system. The State Examinations Commission (SEC) was established by the Department in March 2003 to assume responsibility for the State examinations and for their development, accreditation and certification at Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate levels (including the Leaving Certificate Applied Programme and Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme). There are many possible examinations at Junior Certificate Level and in the established Leaving Certificate programme. Evaluation of the LCA and LCVP consist of examinations, combined with ongoing assessment for attendance and performance over the two-year course.

LCVP is a Senior Cycle Programme designed to give a strong vocational dimension to the Leaving Certificate (established). The programme combines the virtues of academic study with a new and dynamic focus on self-directed learning, enterprise, work and the community. Young people taking the LCVP have a unique opportunity to develop their interpersonal, vocational and technological skills. These skills are equally relevant to the needs of those preparing for further education, seeking employment or planning to commence their own business sometime in the future.

These examinations represent a formal evaluation of the progress of individual students against the objective of national syllabuses in a wide range of subjects. The outcomes of the State examinations also, however, provide a source of evaluation of the content of curricular programmes, syllabuses, teaching methodologies and learning styles from which curriculum development ensues. The implementation of the Framework for Junior Cycle from 2014 sees a significant adjustment in the role of the SEC, with an increased emphasis on school-based assessment throughout the early years in post-primary school and specifically at the end of junior cycle.

School Development Planning

The School Development Planning Initiative was established in 1999 to stimulate and strengthen a culture of collaborative development planning in primary and post-primary schools, with a view to promoting school improvement and effectiveness. It was established in the context of the enactment of the Education Act, 1998, which introduced the requirement that all schools prepare and regularly review and update a School Plan (Section 21). This was further reinforced in the Programme for Prosperity and Fairness (2000) as a basic element of a performance management system and outlined the following for schools:

- The setting of effective and realistic objectives for building strengths/addressing weaknesses;

- The monitoring and review of objectives on an ongoing basis and;
The evaluation of the extent to which objectives have been achieved at the end of the period of the plan.

Although some schools had engaged for some time in formal development planning, many had not yet embarked on the process. While the initiative was, in the first instance, targeted at schools designated as disadvantaged, it was quickly developed and extended and eventually included all primary schools nationally. It was supported by teams of facilitators at the initial phase to enable schools to engage in review, action planning and the definition of vision and aims for primary and for post-primary schools. Grant aid was provided to all schools towards facilitation costs and other expenses. In addition, schools were permitted to allocate a number of teaching days, over a given period, for the purpose of initiating or consolidating the development planning process.

Guidelines for school development planning have been published. These guides outline the components of the School Plan, including the role of the School Plan in the evaluation of the school. School Development Planning at primary level includes a number of steps including a school review, statement of vision, outlining of priorities, setting a short and long term strategic plan, creation of policies and action plans and monitoring and evaluation. Both the PDST and the NCCA support school planning processes. Facilitators assist schools in prioritising areas of reform and thus in the creation of both short-term and long-term plans. Similarly, at post primary level, the planning cycle comprises four key operations: review, design, implementation and evaluation, in order to guide the ongoing development of the school. The School Development Planning 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. The Teacher Education Section (TES) was formerly known as the In-career Development Unit of the department and finances the school grant-aid element of the school development planning at school level.

School Self-Evaluation

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.

School self-evaluation (SSE) is a collaborative, reflective process of internal school review that provides teachers with a means of systematically looking at how they teach and how pupils learn and helps schools and teachers to improve outcomes for learners. All schools were informed by departmental circular in 2012 that SSE was now mandatory for them. Ongoing support and web resources are provided through the national support services and the Inspectorate. Schools engage in a systematic, evidence-based SSE process with a focus on teaching and learning, and on improving literacy and numeracy. It enables schools to evaluate their own teaching, learning and assessment practices in a structured way, with a teaching and learning framework and evaluation criteria. In following the six-step process, schools gather relevant evidence from a range of sources, including parents and pupils. These are then analysed and judgements regarding their strengths and areas for development are made. Having evaluated current practice, schools record their findings, draw up three-year improvement plans, and implement and monitor the actions they have agreed, to reach the planned targets.

To support schools as they engage in SSE, the department has published School Self-Evaluation Guidelines for Primary Schools and School Self-Evaluation Guidelines for Post-Primary Schools in 2012. These guidelines, and other documents, are also available at www.schoolself-evaluation.ie
[41], a dedicated website which has been set up to provide further support for schools. Further supports include:

- Circular 0040/2016 - Continuing Implementation of School Self-Evaluation 2016-2020 - Post Primary [42];
- Circular 0039/2016 - Continuing Implementation of School Self-Evaluation 2016-2020 - Primary and Special Schools [43];
- Looking at Our School 2016 A Quality Framework for Primary Schools [16];
- Looking at Our School 2016 A Quality Framework for Post-Primary schools [44].

In support of the modernisation objectives of these, the Inspectorate promotes school self-evaluation and the implementation of recommendations in inspection reports on schools and centres for education. Since 2012, all whole-school evaluations of schools included a review of the school's self-evaluation processes.

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