

## *Chapter 2*

### **Evaluation and assessment framework**

*In important ways, Northern Ireland stands out internationally. As in all systems within the OECD review, different components (pupil assessment, school evaluation, teacher and school leader appraisal and school system evaluation) have been developed at different stages, but policy development in Northern Ireland aims to bring these together into a more coherent framework. There is a clear expectation that evaluation and assessment lead to improved pupil learning and outcomes but also a need for continued attention to implementing these policies.*

This chapter looks at the overall framework for evaluation and assessment in Northern Ireland, including: student assessment, teacher appraisal, school evaluation and system evaluation. It will explore the coherence of the whole as well as the articulation between the different components. Chapters 3 to 6 will analyse the issues relevant to each individual component in more depth.

This report differentiates between the terms “assessment”, “appraisal” and “evaluation”. The term “assessment” is used to refer to judgements on individual student progress and achievement of learning goals. It covers classroom-based assessments as well as large-scale, external tests and examinations. The term “appraisal” is used to refer to judgements on the performance of school-level professionals, *e.g.* teachers and principals. Finally, the term “evaluation” is used to refer to judgements on the effectiveness of schools, school systems, policies and programmes.

## Context and features

### *Governance*

Northern Ireland’s approach to evaluation and assessment combines: central control over policy development and standard setting; transparency over procedures and reporting of results; an increasing responsibility for the implementation of evaluation and assessment among teachers and schools; and central mechanisms to monitor the effectiveness of implementation. Schools and their Boards of Governors are accountable for their educational quality and are expected to monitor and report on this to their communities as part of a centrally specified school development planning process. At the same time, school quality and development planning processes are monitored by the Department of Education’s Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI). Teachers play a central role in student assessment and also in providing key information for accountability at the system level. At the primary level, central diagnostic tests are provided to support teachers in assessing pupil progress. At the same time, teachers’ assessment of pupil progress against central standards is moderated by the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA). High stakes assessment for pupils at the end of compulsory education is undertaken within an external examination system. The exception to this general approach is teacher appraisal, which remains entirely school based, although the Board of Governors is expected to monitor the school leader’s implementation of teacher appraisal as part of the school principal appraisal process.

### *Key components*

Northern Ireland’s approach to evaluation and assessment consists of the following five main components:

- **Student assessment.** Teachers play a central role in both formative and summative student assessment. From 2012/13, teachers are required to assess pupil progress in all aspects of Northern Ireland’s curriculum and provide annual reports to parents. Teacher assessments of pupil progress in literacy and numeracy must be reported to the Department of Education at the end of Key Stages 1 (Year 4), 2 (Year 7) and 3 (Year 10, in post-primary school). Primary schools can administer central computer-based adaptive tests in literacy and numeracy (Years 4 to 7). At Key Stages 4 and 5 pupils study towards qualifications that are recognised throughout the United Kingdom, largely but not exclusively, the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) and General Certificate of

Education Advanced Level (A Level). These include a strong component of external examinations, but may also include coursework and controlled internal assessment.

- **Teacher appraisal.** Regular teacher appraisal is conducted as part of the annual Performance Review and Staff Development scheme (PRSD). Introduced in 2005, this is an internal school process comprising: an initial meeting to set three objectives; monitoring, including classroom and/or task observation during the year; and a review discussion at the end of the year to produce a review statement. Principals are responsible for the implementation of PRSD, but this may be conducted by senior members of the school staff. The primary purpose of PRSD is to inform teacher professional development needs and to link these to the School Development Plan. Results may also be considered when making decisions about teachers' promotion. New teachers receive a "career entry profile" at the end of their initial education and must complete a one-year induction period during which they prepare a personal two-year action plan for Early Professional Development. They are supported by a tutor within the school. PRSD results do not feed into school inspection. Teacher registration is not linked to teacher appraisal. A new procedure aims to prevent and address underperformance more effectively.
- **School principal appraisal.** School principals are appraised on an annual basis by the Board of Governors within the PRSD scheme (see above). "Leadership and management" is one of three key areas evaluated in school inspections.
- **School evaluation.** The *Every School a Good School* policy (DENI, 2009) emphasises both the school's responsibility for its standards and the role of self-evaluation in school improvement. The Board of Governors is responsible for the School Development Plan, to which school self-evaluation is linked, although this is typically delegated to school principals. Schools must report annually to their community. Schools benefit from analytical software systems and benchmarked data, and can choose from many supporting materials developed by the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI). School inspections are well established and the ETI is introducing a more proportionate, risk-based approach. The school development planning process and school progress toward related targets is inspected. The procedures and results of school inspections are published. The ETI engages school principals and senior educators in school inspection. The Department of Education sets targets for school system performance at different stages of education and individual school performance on these measures is published, but schools are not ranked in league tables.
- **System evaluation.** The Department of Education is responsible for system evaluation and operates within a wider public sector environment of accountability. At the Executive level, Programme for Government targets have been set for pupil attainment at the end of compulsory schooling. Schools report key information to the Department of Education accordingly, including contextual information. Since 2012/13, schools must report on teacher assessments of pupil performance at the end of Key Stages 1, 2 and 3 in literacy and numeracy. A moderation system has been introduced to heighten the comparability of results. An overview of key results from regular school inspections, plus surveys on particular themes conducted by the ETI provide valuable information. Information from international student assessments provides comparative performance

measures. System performance results are published in statistical circulars with benchmark information.

### ***Responsibilities for evaluation and assessment***

The Department of Education is responsible for the development of the evaluation and assessment framework. Within the Department of Education, the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) conducts external school evaluation and is responsible for advising the further development of policies in this area. The Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment was created in 1993 and takes responsibility for the development of curriculum, national assessment tools and guidance and student summative assessment, including certification at end of Key Stage 4 and above.

## **Strengths**

### ***Recognition of the potential synergies among different components of evaluation and assessment***

The OECD Reviews of Evaluation and Assessment in Education have revealed the challenges faced by all systems in designing a coherent evaluation and assessment framework. Many systems have underdeveloped components within the framework and typically each component has been developed at different stages and evolved at a different pace (OECD, 2013). An important aspect in designing an effective evaluation and assessment framework is to be strategic in linking the different components in order to generate complementarities, avoid duplication, and prevent inconsistency of objectives (OECD, 2013). In important ways, Northern Ireland stands out internationally. First, each of the major components is well developed, especially student assessment, school evaluation and system evaluation. Second, policies reflect the importance of articulating the different individual components and recognising their potential synergies. For example:

- School self-evaluation and student assessment: Content requirements in School Development Plans include provision for school self-evaluation of “learning, teaching, assessment, and promoting the raising of standards of attainment among all pupils, in particular in communication, using mathematics and using Information and Communications Technologies (ICT); providing for the professional development of staff;”<sup>1</sup>
- School inspection and student assessment: school inspection pays attention to the school’s assessment policies, including pupil involvement in self-assessment and peer assessment.
- School inspection and system evaluation: The ETI produces a biennial summative report on the education system. The *Count, Read: Succeed* strategy foresees that school inspections will lead to reporting at the system level on standards in literacy and numeracy and on the implementation and effectiveness of this literacy and numeracy strategy (DENI, 2011, p.21).
- Teacher appraisal and school self-evaluation: the teacher appraisal model intends to articulate teacher appraisal, school self-evaluation and school development. One or two of the three personal objectives teachers set in their appraisal are typically school-wide objectives. Teachers’ identified professional development needs should feed into the overall school development plan. The Board of

Governors assesses the adequacy of teacher appraisal at the school as part of school principal appraisal.

- System evaluation, school evaluation and student assessment: the results from student summative assessments form the basis of key measures in system evaluation and provide information and benchmarks for school self-evaluation and school inspection.
- School leader appraisal and teacher appraisal: The Board of Governors should ensure that the professional development and performance of teachers is reviewed annually in accordance with the PRSD scheme (Chapter 5).

Within the school evaluation component, the different elements are further articulated:

- School inspection reports should include an assessment of school development planning. In turn, there is a clear expectation that identified areas for improvement in school inspections are incorporated into the school development planning process.
- Common tools and indicators are available for school inspection and school self-evaluation. Also, common measures of student performance provide evidence for both types of school evaluation.
- Senior educators are engaged in school inspection, which promotes a common evaluative approach.

In addition to ensuring articulations between and within components, an important aspect to promote better synergies is the moderation of processes to ensure consistent application of procedures (OECD, 2013). A major challenge to the Northern Ireland evaluation and assessment framework is the duplication of student assessment procedures (see below). In this context, the introduction of a moderation procedure for end of Key Stage assessments is expected to reduce tensions by increasing trust among primary and post-primary schools in the reliability of assessments and reducing the use of additional assessment procedures (Chapters 3 and 6).

### ***The expectation that evaluation and assessment lead to improved student learning and outcomes***

The highest profile communication regarding evaluation and assessment is arguably the setting of targets for system-wide improvement in Northern Ireland. This takes the target setting within the wider government context of high accountability and promotes improvement in student outcomes (Chapter 6). Targets also communicate the expectation that this leads to improvement for pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds (see below). The Department of Education through its key policies communicates the expectation that learning targets are applied and followed at the individual pupil level.

The Education and Training Inspectorate communicates its mission as “promoting improvement in the interest of all learners” and has introduced over recent years a clearer reporting format in individual school inspection reports to highlight key areas for improvement (Chapter 5). School inspection examines both centrally available and school generated data on student performance and learning progress. Analysis of a random selection of individual school reports also shows that inspectors pay attention to the progression of pupils with special educational needs. There is a recent policy to pay

greater attention to specific outcomes in literacy and numeracy. The *Count, Read: Succeed* strategy stipulates that school inspection reports will include an assessment of pupils' attainment in literacy and numeracy and the quality of teaching and learning. Further, individual school inspections will provide evidence on literacy and numeracy standards at the system level.

There is clear communication that the purpose of centrally provided computer-based assessments at the primary level is to support diagnostic and formative assessment; this is bolstered by the policy to not collect results centrally (Chapter 3).

### ***Official policy puts pupils at the centre of the evaluation and assessment framework***

In Northern Ireland, there is a high degree of coherence between the curriculum and official policy in putting pupils at the centre of evaluation and assessment processes, which is a desirable principle in the design of the evaluation and assessment framework (OECD, 2013). For example, both the curriculum and school inspection promote the active involvement of pupils in assessment (Chapter 3). There is also a strong official focus on formative and diagnostic assessment of pupil learning progress. The Entitlement Framework (Chapter 1) seeks to ensure more options for pupils in their school studies. The pupil focus is clear in the key official policies and reporting, for example:

- *Every School a Good School (ESaGS)*: The first of the key principles listed is that “the interests of pupils rather than institutions must be at the centre of efforts to improve educational achievement and tackle underachievement” (DENI, 2009, p.13). For example, there is a specific goal to: “provide a resource to support school councils and to encourage all schools to set up councils or other forums to ensure that pupils have a voice in decisions on the running of the school” (DENI, 2009, p.41).
- *Count, Read: Succeed*: “It must be a central purpose of our schools, supported by parents, to ensure that pupils develop the necessary literacy and numeracy skills to succeed at school and later on, in life and at work.” (DENI, 2011, p.8)
- *Chief Inspector’s Report 2010-2012*: “We are totally learner-focused and make our evaluations in the interest of the learner, based on first-hand evidence.” (Preface by the Chief Inspector, ETI, 2012).

### ***Recognition of the importance of equity***

In most countries there is an emergent focus on equity and inclusion among educational goals (OECD, 2013). An overview of evidence on the school system in Northern Ireland identifies the importance of ensuring that evaluation and assessment processes pay adequate attention to improving equity within the system (Chapter 1). One of two overarching goals for the Department of Education is “Closing the performance gap, increasing equity and equality” (Chapter 6). The most recent target setting exercise by the Minister and the Department of Education has an explicit focus on tackling disadvantage. There are specific targets set to increase the proportion of disadvantaged pupils (measured as those entitled to free school meals) successfully achieving five General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) qualifications or equivalent with grades A\* to C (including GCSEs in mathematics and English). The 1998 literacy and numeracy strategy did not include specific targets to increase outcomes for disadvantaged pupils. The Minister wishes to communicate, via the target setting exercise, clear

expectations for improvement in the educational outcomes of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Following a review of the Special Education Needs (SEN) policy and supporting framework, a revised SEN policy is positioned within the raising standards agenda of ESaGS and will, for example: ensure the child is placed firmly at the centre of the process for identification assessment, provision and review; ensure the special education support needs of all children are met in school and the support services (ELB or new ESA); put a clear focus on learning and outcomes for pupils with SEN, ensuring that the views of parents and pupils are heard (p. 21, DENI, 2013). The revised SEN policy will be supported by changes to primary legislation, revised SEN regulations and a Code of Practice.

The Entitlement Framework (Chapter 1) aims to ensure pupils have access to a wider choice of educational provision that is effectively planned on an area basis. The Department of Education aims to tackle the underachievement of boys with, among other approaches, an advertising campaign to attract more men into the teaching profession. The Department of Education has also run a publicity campaign about valuing education to promote the importance of parents being behind school and sharing ambition for their children. The narrative here is to tackle the “Poverty of aspiration”.

### ***Potential to redesign and improve the quality of support offered to schools***

The Department of Education envisages the creation of a central Education and Skills Authority (ESA) (Chapter 1). The creation of this single authority is expected to significantly streamline the governance of the school system, with the potential to free up more resources for school support services. The school support function would also be taken up by the ESA, replacing the current support structures offered by the five Education and Library Boards (ELBs). An efficiency review found marked variation between the ELBs in the amount of core funding they allocated to the Curriculum Advisory Support Services (CASS), which was interpreted to reflect significant differences in the relative value and priority attached to CASS (DENI and DFPNI, 2011). Departmental policy aims to promote “greater coherence and consistency in the provision of support to schools” (DENI, 2011, p.16). This presents an opportunity to draw on the best practices in current school support services and to review ways to further improve school support (Chapter 5).

Schools in Northern Ireland already benefit from a rich set of supporting tools to help with school self-evaluation and the monitoring of pupil learning progress. The major needs going forward are to further strengthen capacity for school self-evaluation and for student formative and summative assessment against the Levels of Progression. In particular, the ESA would provide support to schools in preparing their School Development Plan and could build the Board of Governors’ capacity in challenging school principals and monitoring school self-evaluation (Chapter 5).

### ***Attention to using a broad set of evidence in policy making***

Northern Ireland is an evidence rich system. There are established information and reporting systems and there is attention to mobilising these results for policy makers (Chapter 6). There is also a breadth of measures available on student outcomes, including the collection of qualitative measures via school inspections (Chapters 5 and 6). Evidence is therefore available on pastoral care and pupil well-being, in addition to specific research surveys. The curriculum is broad and new assessment arrangements aim to

promote a more rounded assessment of pupils' knowledge and skills (Chapter 3). Northern Ireland has also engaged in more international comparative surveys to evaluate the system from a broader perspective (Chapter 6). School inspections are firmly based in the collection of first-hand evidence, notably by a well-developed system of the direct observation of the teaching and learning process (Chapter 5).

### ***An approach to build on teacher professionalism***

The OECD review team notes that teachers are respected and trusted professionals in Northern Ireland (Chapter 4). Official policy aims to build on and strengthen teacher professionalism. This is of key importance as the ability for the evaluation and assessment framework to effect changes in the classroom and improve student learning largely depends on teacher professionalism (OECD, 2013). In Northern Ireland, there is a strong official focus on teachers' professional judgement in student assessment policy (Chapter 3). Official policy aims to build on and strengthen the levels of assessment literacy among teachers. The new moderation procedure for key stage assessment holds strong potential to build teacher capacity in student summative assessment against the Levels of Progression (Chapter 6).

Of equal importance is the approach to engage educators in pilots and the development of key policies. While the OECD review team noted some concerns on the feedback of teacher views in specific pilots (Chapter 3), the general approach is sound. There are also open communication channels between the Department of Education and the trade unions. The OECD review team noted the commitment from the Minister to working with trade unions in refining policies. An example is the decision (subsequent to the OECD review visit) based on feedback from educators to change the status of computer-based assessments at the primary level from compulsory to optional in 2013/14. The Minister also wishes to strengthen the General Teaching Council as a professional body, a move that is supported by the business community (CBI, 2012).

The OECD review team learned from representatives of trade unions that there was broad support for the official policies regarding the introduction of the new assessment arrangements (see also, ATL, 2010), as well as recognition of the need to improve equality within Northern Ireland's school system.

### ***Principle of transparency in reporting results of evaluation and assessment***

The overall evaluation and assessment framework can be strengthened through transparency in monitoring and publishing results (OECD, 2013). In Northern Ireland, there is a clear policy for transparency and accountability. The results of evaluation and assessment are reported. School inspection reports are published on the ETI website, system level results are reported in statistical bulletins on the Department of Education's website, school level results are available on the Schools+ Database on the Department of Education's website, and the CCEA publishes aggregate results of the Key Stage assessments.



## Challenges

### *Some duplication and inconsistencies within the evaluation and assessment framework*

Although there is a clear reflection in official policy on how to articulate the different components of the evaluation and assessment framework, there is a need to go further. In particular to create better synergies between:

- School self-evaluation and school inspection. Where school self-evaluation procedures are highly developed, there is a concern that school inspection may “double up” on procedures in self-evaluation (Chapter 5).
- Student assessment at primary and post-primary levels. While there is a rich documentation of pupil progress and level of progression in primary schools, many post-primary schools do not use this information to inform subsequent teaching once a pupil is accepted and a high number administer unregulated entrance tests; duplicating assessment for pupils (Chapter 3).
- Teacher registration, career progression and teacher appraisal. The role of teacher registration is not clear and there is limited use of the results of teacher appraisal to inform career progression (Chapter 4).

In important areas there are also challenges to ensure greater consistency:

- Teacher appraisal. Despite the existence of a set of teacher competency standards, these are often not used as a common reference in teacher appraisal (Chapter 4). There are variations in the implementation of the PRSD scheme and there is no external validation of teacher appraisal processes.
- School leader appraisal. School leadership standards do not appear to be widely used and the Board of Governors’ capacity to conduct school leader appraisal varies (Chapter 5).

### *Lack of broad political support for assessment policy*

A polarised political debate over the testing of pupils for post-primary school selection is impeding the effective implementation of pupil assessment against the Levels of Progression and, by extension, the Northern Ireland curriculum. This is penalising pupils and is reportedly creating unnecessary stress and duplication of work for teachers in many primary schools (Chapter 3).

The OECD review team met with representatives of employers and the teaching profession and noted a high level of support for the Northern Ireland curriculum. The CBI (2012) welcomes the focus of the Northern Ireland curriculum. The curriculum and key stage assessment policies are designed around pupil progression through the school system. However, there is a real risk that political tensions will create a lack of coherence in pupils’ assessment through the school system. Although a robust moderation procedure is being implemented to increase the reliability of teacher assessments at the primary level, the political debate on one side fuels the perception that there is a need to duplicate pupil assessment, and on the other limits the potential in the new moderation procedures to better meet the information needs of all post-primary schools.

### ***Building credibility and capacity in the proposed school support model (ESA)***

With the accent on further strengthening teacher professionalism, the OECD review identifies a need to build credibility among educators in the proposed school support model: the Education and Skills Authority. The capacity within the proposed authority will be crucial in introducing sufficient balance across the system between the support and challenge functions. At the time of the OECD review, there was a high degree of uncertainty among educators about the form the new support model would take. The fact that the school inspection approach identifies schools most in need of improvement sends the signal that support services should primarily target schools most in need of improvement (Chapter 5). Depending on the capacity available in the proposed ESA, such a strategy is likely to impact on a wider offer of professional development services to all schools. It is as yet unclear to what extent the proposed support model would draw on current expertise from schools. Principals and teachers are more likely to listen to advice from people in the school system who have faced similar challenges.

### ***Implementation can be tokenistic***

The student assessment and system evaluation policies have been formulated to align assessment processes to Northern Ireland’s knowledge and skills based curriculum (Chapter 3). However, teachers have reservations about the implementation of assessment against the Levels of Progression. At the same time, schools like the functionality of commercial tests to assess pupil progress, although these may not be aligned to curriculum. If standards are poorly designed or not specific enough, teachers are more likely to focus on tests, thus narrowing the focus of teaching (Stecher et al., 2000). A key tension in relation to the implementation of the curriculum at Key Stage 2 is the use of unregulated transfer tests by a number of post-primary schools. There is no guarantee that these tests are aligned to the Northern Ireland curriculum, but they reportedly influence what is taught in some primary schools (Chapter 3). Such misalignment can have serious consequences on instruction and learning (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2010).

There are also variations in the implementation of the PRSD scheme and this impacts primarily teacher appraisal, but also school principal appraisal (Chapters 4 and 5). Teachers may feel that teacher appraisal does not focus sufficiently on their individual professional development needs and/or feel that there is inadequate provision of professional learning opportunities (Chapter 4).

In general, the lack of “social alignment” impedes system learning and improvement (Looney, 2011a). All evaluation activities require good “social alignment”, i.e. social capital in systems, including shared values, motives and efforts around educational goals and the principles underlining them (Baker, 2004; Hargreaves, 2003).

## **Policy options**

The analysis above notes that the evaluation and assessment framework in Northern Ireland has been developed using the majority of key principles of design recommended by the OECD Reviews of Evaluation and Assessment in Education. The policy options below focus on consolidating this and building consensus and capacity to ensure effective implementation:

- Further integrate the evaluation and assessment framework

- Prioritise efforts to effectively implement the evaluation and assessment framework
- Continue the approach to draw on teacher professionalism
- Engage educators in designing future school support services
- Provide platforms for informed debate among key stakeholders
- Raise public awareness of the importance of equity and the shift to competencies
- Prioritise building credibility for the new approach

### ***Further integrate the evaluation and assessment framework***

In many ways, Northern Ireland stands out internationally as having a more strategic approach to the development of the evaluation and assessment framework. Many aspects are thoughtfully designed and there is a high degree of articulation between the different evaluation components. The OECD review team has identified ways to further integrate the evaluation and assessment framework. In school evaluation, there is room to go further in linking school inspection with self-evaluation (Chapter 5). The other points relate to reducing inconsistencies. In student assessment, this relates to the new moderation procedures for end of key stage assessments. Moderation is expected to reduce inconsistencies up to the end of Key Stage 3 and importantly, once implemented, reduce duplication of student assessment, particularly during Key Stage 2. In going forward, there is an urgent need to build teachers' trust in the new moderation system and to seek and communicate ways to minimise the reporting burden on schools.

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

The OECD Reviews of Evaluation and Assessment in Education have resulted in a set of recommendations for implementing the evaluation and assessment framework (Box 2.1). Effective implementation seeks to strike the right balance between the combination of top-down and bottom-up initiatives, which is generally believed to foster consensus (Finlay et al., 1998). For example, in the Netherlands, policy aims to seek the correct balance between four co-ordinating mechanisms: steering by the government; steering by professionals; competition among schools; co-operation among schools. The benefits of competition include a heightened response to stakeholder needs, while greater co-operation among schools can save resources and generate societal wellbeing (Dutch Ministry of Education and Science, 2013). Specific recommendations for Northern Ireland are elaborated in Box 2.1 on the following page.

### **Box 2.1 OECD recommendations for implementing the evaluation and assessment framework**

#### **Engage stakeholders and practitioners in the designing and implementing evaluation and assessment policies**

A range of strategies to consolidate the implementation of evaluation and assessment policies are available. To start with, the policy development process is more likely to yield consensus and compromise among parties if policies are developed by different stakeholders cooperating towards a common goal. Regular interactions contribute to building trust among different stakeholders and raising awareness for the major concerns of others, thereby enhancing the inclination of the different parties for compromise. Educational evaluation policy has much more to gain from the cross-fertilisation of the distinct perspectives into compromises than from antagonism and the imposition of particular views over other stakeholder groups. Teachers will more easily accept to be evaluated if they are consulted in the design of the process. By taking their fears and claims into account, teachers' professionalism, the scarcity of their skills, and the extent of their responsibilities is recognised. If teacher appraisal procedures are unilaterally designed at the level of the administrative structure, without addressing and including the core of teaching practice, then there will be a "loose coupling" between administrators and teachers, that will both fail to provide public guarantees of quality, and will discourage reflection and review among teachers themselves (Elmore, 2000; Kleinhenz and Ingvarson, 2004).

In more general terms, this calls for practitioners such as school leaders and teachers to be engaged in the design, management and analysis of evaluation and assessment policies. Consensus building among stakeholders is all the more important since local actors may be in the best position to foresee unintended consequences and judge what is feasible in practice.

#### **Communicate the rationale for reform**

Another priority is to clearly communicate a long-term vision of what is to be accomplished for student learning as the rationale for proposed evaluation and assessment policies. Individuals and groups are more likely to accept changes that are not necessarily in their own best interests if they understand the reasons for these changes and can see the role they should play within the broad national strategy. This includes dissemination of the evidence basis underlying the policy diagnosis, research findings on alternative policy options and their likely impact, as well as information on the costs of reform vs. inaction. Such communication and dissemination is critical to gain the support of society at large for educational evaluation reforms, not just the stakeholders with a direct interest.

#### **Use pilots before full implementation and review implementation**

Policy experimentation and the use of pilots may prove effective strategies to overcome blockages dictated by disagreements among stakeholders and to assess the effectiveness of policy innovations before generalising them. Policy makers need to ensure mechanisms and platforms for the ongoing review and development of evaluation and appraisal systems are up-to-date with latest research and developments (e.g. through advisory or steering groups). In the same way, education practitioners should be provided opportunities to express their views and concerns on given evaluation and assessment initiatives as these are implemented. Implementation should involve feedback loops that allow adjustments to be made. School agents should be provided with opportunities to express their perceptions and concerns on evaluation processes as they are implemented. Interviews and surveys are common methods used to collect feedback on evaluation processes. The items generally include the understanding of the process, the acceptance of the standards, the fairness of the process and of the results, the capability and objectivity of the evaluators, the quality of the feedback received, the perceived impact of the evaluation process on practices, and the overall impression of the evaluation system.

### **Box 2.1 OECD recommendations for implementing the evaluation and assessment framework (continued)**

#### **Ensure adequate capacity and sufficient resources**

It is essential to develop capacity among stakeholders to implement evaluation and assessment policies. This includes providing support for school agents to understand evaluation procedures, training for evaluators to effectively undertake their responsibilities, and preparation for school agents to use the results of evaluation. Evaluation and assessment are beneficial for improvement of educational practices provided that they engage the skills and commitment of practitioners.

Finally, there is a need for reducing excessive bureaucratic demands on schools and ensuring sufficient resources are provided in the implementation of evaluation and assessment policies. A consequence is that both those being evaluated and evaluators should be partly released from other duties. Schools agents should have time to reflect on their own practices, especially when the process requires self-appraisal and the constitution of a portfolio. Another aim should be reducing the administrative workload for evaluators, especially school leaders, in order to provide them with more time for evaluation activities, feedback and coaching.

*Source:* OECD (2013), *Synergies for Better Learning: An International Perspective on Evaluation and Assessment*, OECD Reviews of Evaluation and Assessment in Education, OECD Publishing. doi: [10.1787/9789264190658-en](https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264190658-en)

#### ***Continue the approach to draw on teacher professionalism***

Teachers are central to securing links between the evaluation and assessment framework and the classroom. This highlights the importance for evaluation and assessment frameworks to draw on the professionalism of teachers in ensuring evaluation and assessment activities result in authentic improvement of classroom practices and student learning (OECD, 2013). The OECD review team commends the approach to build on and secure teacher professionalism in Northern Ireland.

Impacting classroom practice is likely to require the evaluation and assessment framework to place considerable emphasis on its developmental function (OECD, 2013). Channels that are likely to reinforce links to classroom practice include: an emphasis on teacher appraisal for the continuous improvement of teaching practices; ensuring teaching standards are aligned with student learning objectives; involving teachers in school evaluation, in particular through conceiving school self-evaluation as a collective process with responsibilities for teachers; ensuring that teachers are seen as the main experts not only in instructing but also in assessing their students, so teachers feel the ownership of student assessment and accept it as an integral part of teaching and learning; building teacher capacity for student formative assessment; and building teachers' ability to assess against educational standards.

#### ***Engage educators in designing future school support services***

A strong focus on professionalism implies the need for a significant, sustained and focused investment in professional development. Teachers need to develop skills to assess learning needs and a broad repertoire of strategies to meet a range of student needs. Teacher professionalism also points to a stronger role for teachers in the development of student learning objectives and of assessment and evaluation systems. Based on their review of literature on accountability and classroom instruction, Ballard and Bates (2008)

underscore the importance of communication among teachers and those who write learning objectives, develop large-scale assessments, and set out guidelines for school evaluations.

The OECD review team has underlined the opportunity to improve school support services with the proposed Education and Skills Authority. It is critical that educators are seriously engaged in helping to design these services. Kennedy (2005) argues that a rejection of reform initiatives by highly dedicated teachers does not come from their unwillingness to change or improve, but from “the sad fact that most reforms don’t acknowledge the realities of classroom teaching”. If teachers are involved in planning and implementing evaluation schemes, they are more likely to sustain reform efforts (Leithwood et al., 2002). It follows that teachers are best placed to communicate the reality of classroom teaching and the major demands for professional development. Research has identified some gaps in the current professional development offer. For example, a gap in provision of continuing professional development and in initial teacher education programmes in building (student) teachers’ confidence to address bullying related to perceived or actual disabilities or more broadly to special educational needs (Purdy and Mc Guckin, 2011). Given the increased proportion of pupils with identified special educational needs in Northern Ireland’s schools, it would seem likely that there would be demand for a range of different professional development to meet the needs of this heterogeneous pupil group. Teachers can play a crucial role in communicating relative priorities for professional development across the system.

### ***Provide platforms for informed debate among key stakeholders***

A study of evidence-informed policy making underlines how the involvement of practitioners (teachers, other educational staff and their unions) in the production of research evidence and in its interpretation and translation into policy gives them a strong sense of ownership and strengthens their confidence in the reform process (OECD, 2007). In Northern Ireland, there is a sound approach to engage educators in the piloting and review of different assessment policies. However, there is room to more systematically engage educators in the discussion of evaluation and assessment results; importantly in the deliberation of how to develop policies to address identified challenges. The OECD Reviews of Evaluation and Assessment in Education have revealed some examples of how other systems attempt to do this (Box 2.2).

#### **Box 2.2 Stakeholder discussion of major evaluation and assessment results**

##### **Conferences to discuss key assessment results and to develop possible actions**

The Flemish Ministry of Education and Training promotes the discussion and use of results from the national assessments in a number of ways. First, the key results and an analysis of factors associated with achievement are reported on the Ministry’s website, in a specific brochure and via a colloquium. Second, the Ministry seeks feedback on the results from key stakeholders, including the school support bodies (School Advisory Services), the Flemish Inspectorate of Education, Institutes responsible for initial teacher education, researchers and publishers etc. Third, following these consultations, the Ministry organises an open conference to discuss possible actions to promote and improve school quality. Fourth, the Ministry and other stakeholders engage in concrete actions based on the results and subsequent discussions. Possible improvements include: updating of the attainment targets; developing or adjusting curricula or teaching materials; adjusting initial teacher education and/or teacher professional development; adjusting school policies; introducing new initiatives to support specific student groups.

**Box 2.2 Stakeholder discussion of major evaluation and assessment results**  
(continued)

**Advisory body representing major stakeholders in schooling**

In Denmark, the School Council for Evaluation and Quality Development of Primary and Lower Secondary Education is an advisory body with representatives from all the major stakeholder groups. The School Council holds an annual meeting at which major evidence on the education system is discussed and debated. This is also supported by the production of an annual report presenting a summary of major research and evidence.

*Source:* Flemish Ministry of Education and Training and the University of Antwerp Edubron Research Group, 2010; Shewbridge *et al.* 2011.

***Raise public awareness of the importance of equity and the shift to competencies***

Communication is of significant importance when implementing evaluation and assessment policies (Box 2.1). There is a need for a sustained communication of the rationale for the reforms to pupil assessment. The Department of Education policy documents pay attention to international research and there is a clear commitment to the use of evidence in policy making. Chapter 1 provides a brief overview of evidence on the school system and demonstrates the importance of setting high level goals to address inequities. Such evidence needs to be clearly communicated to a broader public. There is a need to go further and to extend the media campaign in raising awareness of the importance of these long-term goals.

***Prioritise building credibility for the new approach***

In order to ensure a continued commitment to new policies, it is essential to review and refine their implementation as necessary. For example, the review of the computer-based assessments at the primary level conducted during 2013. Such reviews are critical in building credibility for the new approach, and provide a mechanism for listening to schools, recognising any limitations, and addressing issues as a matter of priority. The policy to provide a central diagnostic tool at the primary level to support pupil assessment is commendable, and will help to align assessment practices with the curriculum. The subsequent decision to continue to refine these tests and to offer them to schools, underlines the commitment to providing supporting tools for schools to monitor pupil learning progress.

## Notes

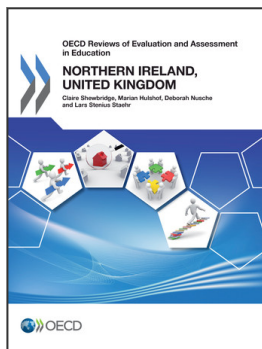
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- 1 . The Education (School Development Plans) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2010:  
[www.legislation.gov.uk/nisr/2010/395/schedule/made](http://www.legislation.gov.uk/nisr/2010/395/schedule/made)



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