Education Scotland (ES) and NQ’s

The performance of Education Scotland over the last number of years has left much to be desired.

The many problems that we face in schools regarding bureaucracy and workload should have been picked up years ago during the inspection process. Their unwillingness to listen to the concerns of the profession regarding the introduction of CfE and NQ’s has now led to the current situation where teachers are having to threaten strike action simply in order to get enough time to teach. The “we know better” approach lies at the heart of all the problems with ES. This and their use of unnecessarily verbose, incomprehensible language, conflicting information and lack of direction has been instrumental in bringing schools to their knees.

ES and the Curriculum

Of the many examples I could give the following illustrates the above points.

A colleague and I worked along with primary colleagues to develop a ‘Science Passport’ which was to help with the transition between primary and secondary science. We were asked to consider putting it on the National Assessment Resource (NAR) once it was developed and if we agreed to do so there was a grant available to assist with the printing of the materials. We agreed. Little did we know what we had let ourselves in for. The detail of the problems we faced in dealing with ES became unsurmountable and suffice to say that our materials are not on the NAR. The reasons given were that it wasn’t clear where “the children had ownership” and that aspects of “the journey” and the “professional conversations undertaken” were not clear in our submission. Given this ridiculous approach by ES it is hardly surprising the paucity of tried and tested resources on the NAR. Our resources are, however, being used both in our school and have been adopted by a number of other secondary schools within our authority and we have had a couple of requests for permission to use them by schools out with our authority. They are still not on the NAR and so cannot be accessed nationally which is a pity.

ES and Inspections

I accept that there are pros and cons to the length of notice that schools have pre inspection. However the shadow of an impending inspection and the farcical level of box ticking exercises once an inspection has been announced is ridiculous. When the inspection was announced in our school, the school was opened (at a cost) for two weekends to allow staff to “tidy things up” and staff were drafted in from the Authority to ensure paperwork was “what the inspectorate would be looking for” (based upon recent inspections of other schools in the Authority). Speaking to
colleagues in other schools this seems common practice. The fact that ES are either incapable of finding out what actually happens in a school or choose to accept that it happens as it fits with what they want (or are told) to see is worrying. It is also dangerous as it gives a completely false impression of the state of the education system as a whole.

My school was inspected recently and I found those carrying out the inspection to be condescending and aloof. It became clear very quickly that they were simply in to gather evidence to support views already held and to ignore any information given which might detract from those views. I will give one example to illustrate.

In the individual Pre Inspection Questionnaire, I raised a number of issues regarding the management of the school. I was not invited to meet to discuss these with any of the Inspecting team. I reasoned that either it had not been read or was being ignored as the views of a disaffected member of staff. However, on publication of the report it was revealed that the percentage of staff who disagreed or strongly disagreed with the effectiveness of school management was significantly higher than the National averages. Clearly I was not alone with my concerns. Despite this the report stated that management was a strength of the school. I would doubt very much if those staff responding to the questionnaire were simply unable to recognise effective leadership. As a consequence of ES unwillingness to listen to our concerns, it is worth pointing out that, despite the issues regarding bureaucracy and workload, my school still has no absence cover policy and last session did not have a Working Time Agreement. I would have thought that both of these documents would be a cornerstone of a school with strong management as they are vital in managing bureaucracy, workload and in the case of Absence Cover the consequences of not managing them. One member of staff (STEM subject teacher) has now left the profession citing bureaucracy and workload as the main contributing factors.

The lack of (public) comment by the inspectorate on a number of critical issues in schools during inspections suggests that ES are more civil servants than they are educationalists. The fact that they are not suggests strongly that they are being directed not to report on them. In brief:

Resources

The amount of money I had to spend on apparatus for physics 24 years ago as a new PT of physics enabled me to purchase of up to date text books and apparatus as required to run the courses on offer. Bids had to be made for larger items. For the last seven or eight years my budget has been used solely for photocopying. The apparatus I bought all those years ago is still in use. Given that there is a big push towards STEM subjects I would have thought that resources that a department has at their disposal would be an integral part of any inspection.

This lack of resourcing has leads directly to a lack of equality for pupils.

Many pupils will have considerable support at home in terms of supportive parents, access to text books, access to technology etc. Many may have parents or siblings with a qualification to help with the subject being researched. Indeed, many may
have a parent who is a teacher in the subject for which the research is being carried out. These pupils will have a considerable advantage over pupils who do not have similar support. Many pupils do not have supportive parents or access to necessary research materials out with school. Why do the ES not investigate the effect that lack of access to materials has on a pupil’s ability to complete compulsory SQA assessments on an equal footing across Scotland? Why have they allowed SQA to include such unfair assessments in the first place?

Stress

Pupils are extremely stressed about the assessment burden. It was crystal clear that this was going to be the case. Why was it not clear to ES? Why has it taken action by trade unions and parents to force a review of assessments and course structures? Clearly ES has or should have a role in investigating these matters as part of any inspection.

Conclusion

I intended to say that, for all the reasons above, ES are not fit for purpose. As I have written my experiences, as detailed above, of my direct involvement with ES, I have changed my conclusion to asking what purpose ES serve?

For matters to improve I would:

Give complete autonomy to ES to report on what they find – no matter how politically sensitive it might be to the party in power at that time;

Rotate ES personnel – the vast majority of ES staff should be experienced career professionals on 2-3 year secondments who then return to their schools to share what they have learned both within their own school and their Authority.