

SCHOOL SELF-EVALUATION:

A PROCESS OF CHANGE

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1 Introduction

The Association recognises that school self-evaluation is one of the fundamental foundations on which genuine school improvement is built, and that it has an integral place at the heart of the drive to continually raise standards in schools. The purpose of school self-evaluation is to provide a coherent framework, located within overall planning systems and well aligned to other principal features of the improvement process.

The nature of the actual systems and procedures used for self-evaluation are important. Purely paper-based methods tend to be unproductive, and lack the creativity and openness that should always underpin self-evaluation. Sound self-evaluation processes demand an organic interactive approach, in order to be informative and instructive, through the honest identification and analysis of strengths and weaknesses. Through sound school self-evaluation, potential difficulties can be anticipated and counteracted. Forms and 'tick lists' are not enough.

The Association broadly welcomed the introduction of Ofsted's revised inspection framework in September 2003, which places a high priority on school self-evaluation as a key means through which an inspection is shaped.

Ofsted considers that both the quality and use made of school self-evaluation is a good indication of the calibre and effectiveness of school leadership and management, and of the school's capacity to improve. Evidence is derived from an unpublished Ofsted study, which found a close correlation between the

quality of 100 S4 Forms and final inspection reports.

Ofsted usefully defines the role of school self-evaluation as a "**continuous process** that is complemented from time to time by external inspections. Self-evaluation makes an important contribution to inspections. It provides the school and the registered inspector with a means of ensuring that inspection covers matters of potential significance to the school."

An enhanced and established position for self-evaluation within a school's accountability framework is also fully in line with the Association's own principles and perspectives for ongoing educational improvement, based on the practical experience of members in the field. Nevertheless, the quality of school self-evaluation is variable as evidenced by Ofsted (see section 5 for further details).

2 Principles of School Self-evaluation

2.1 Moderation and support

An external input to school self-evaluation is both highly advantageous to, and generally favoured by, schools themselves. Clearly, a balance has to be found between respect for 'ownership' of the school and the concept of appropriate external 'critical friendship'.

The gain from receiving the challenge and support of an informed 'critical friend', whether a trained LEA adviser or educational consultant, who is external to the school, can help the school to identify areas for development, adds an extra dimension to evaluative activities, and empowers individuals and the organisation as a whole to ask difficult questions.

The involvement, challenge and support of the LEA to a school's self-evaluation process is therefore crucial. Although business or non-educational consultants can add a different and usefully challenging perspective – particularly to governing bodies and higher education institutions where closer linkages often exist – the Association believes that, for the most part, people with distinct educational expertise are best placed to provide external moderation and support, and the limited involvement of business or non-educational consultants should not detract from the necessary role of specialist advice. In short, an external stimulus to schools' processes is critical, and the potential value of LEA moderation and support cannot be overestimated.

In advocating the role of the LEA in moderating and supporting school self-evaluation, it is important to recognise there may be tensions which require local reconciliation. The LEA must be clear about

its vision and purpose in working with schools, and it must not interfere with 'ownership' issues. Predominantly though, an LEA lead is appreciated, as numerous good examples of local guidance and modelling serve to demonstrate.

2.2 The inclusive approach

School self-evaluation should lead to a shared understanding, by all staff, governors, parents and pupils about values, common goals and developmental needs. It should augment awareness of individual developmental requirements and inform personal and professional planning.

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Detached leadership of the school self-evaluation process by senior management teams is to be resisted, with peer review at all levels within the school being just one valuable possible inclusive mechanism. Staff participation and engagement in school self-evaluation processes have a vital part to play in ensuring valuable outcomes.

All staff should therefore be involved in the self-evaluation process, partly through performance management, regular observation of learning and teaching, evaluation of pupils' performance and department reviews, and also as a result of direct involvement in well-developed improvement activities.

Links between self-evaluation and staff development and review, are very important, as are linkages to responsibility frameworks. In addition, there is a great deal that is positive about involving pupils in self-evaluation, with mechanisms such as a school's council (which is valid across all sectors) being particularly useful. (It is important to note, however, that the actual processes require a degree of pupil age sensitivity.)

“If school governors are to fulfil their statutory duties effectively and efficiently their involvement at all stages takes on an extra significance.”

The involvement of linked and partner institutions and organisations and the wider school community also add further constructive facets to evaluative considerations. Broad-based perspectives on aspects of school performance are evermore relevant, especially in the context of the development of the wider children's services agenda and the rollout of extended schools.

Questionnaires are often helpful in widening the sources that impact upon the evidence base, and can provide focused information to assist more detailed considerations.

2.3 School self-evaluation and school governance

Without detracting from the importance of other interested parties participating in school self-evaluation, the Association believes the role of school governors can be especially relevant. Indeed, if school governors are to fulfil their statutory duties effectively and

efficiently, their involvement at all stages takes on an extra significance.

The current Ofsted inspection framework reinforces this importance, given that inspectors must evaluate and report on a number of aspects of the governance of the school, where separation from self-evaluation processes and information about outcomes would leave governors open to adverse criticism. The effectiveness of the governing body therefore forms one of the key focal points of the school inspection process.

The Ofsted framework stipulates that, within an inspection, a judgment must be made on the extent to which the governing body:

- Helps shape the vision and direction of the school
- Ensures that the school fulfils its statutory duties, including promoting inclusive policies in relation to special educational needs, race equality, disability and sex
- Has a good understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the school
- Challenges and supports the senior management team.

Participation in and information about school self-evaluation greatly facilitates the capacity of governors to meet these expectations properly. In practical terms, this can be delivered in a variety of ways, and at different levels: the secret, however, is to build systems that permit dedicated and focused discussions.

It is also beneficial for a governing body to adopt more formal self-evaluation of its own operation, enabling it to evaluate its impact, strengths and weaknesses. Through such mechanisms, the contribution of the governing body to the school can be maximised.

2.4 A firm evidence base

Objectivity is key to sound school self-evaluation, demanding that all statements and assertions are demonstrable through hard evidence, and that main sources are explicitly made within any appropriate documentation. Statements should be specific: any vague assertions should be deliberately avoided.

The Association appreciates the value of qualitative as well as quantitative detail within the school self-evaluation process, which allows for elements of subjective judgments. Qualitative subjective views should, however, be tested.

A broad inclusive approach, in itself, and appropriate external support both act as balancing influences in moderating subjectivity. This can be managed through direct and interactive process involvement, as well as by securing feedback through questionnaires and other measurable means.

Where quantitative data is used, sources should be extensive in order not only to provide benchmarks for performance which really enable effective comparisons across schools, but also to take due account of contextual and value-added issues. Data on pupils' attainment, measures of attendance and absence, exclusion rates, school leavers' destinations, school costs and the extent to which the school delivers best value in the deployment of its resources, are all highly relevant.

Schools need to be able to use performance data efficiently and effectively as a tool of self-evaluation. Where data is used, it should facilitate assessments of school performance against local and national comparators.

2.5 Relationship to performance

The prime aim of school self-evaluation

is to provide a sound analytical base from which conclusions can be drawn. Evaluation rather than description – with a focus and impact on pupil outcomes – has to be the central force, and school self-evaluation requires facts, not anecdotes, with clear evidence bases. Although there has to be a degree of flexibility, school self-evaluation should deploy a number of key common indicators. The main focuses are: learning and teaching; data and information analysis and interpretation; assessment; pupils' personal development, values and attitudes; leadership and management.

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In terms of greater detail and implementation, the Association commends the use of the present Ofsted S4 Form. (Although as mentioned in section 2.1, many LEAs have produced excellent local frameworks.) The new Ofsted Self-Evaluation Form (SEF) – linked to the new inspection framework to apply from September 2005 – will need to be assessed in light of current pilots of the new Ofsted framework itself. Effective school self-evaluation will not be possible unless it is related to highly important factors such as focused performance and outcomes, systematic methods for observation of teaching and learning, scrutiny of pupils' work, and discussions with pupils to see how well they are achieving.

2.6 Links to planning cycles

School self-evaluation should be fully enveloped within overall planning cycles, being informed by and informing the school development plan and staff performance management and CPD programmes. Impact measures should align closely to school improvement priorities and help identify and implement further strategies for action. In this way, organisational and personal developmental plans will derive from the identified and verifiable needs of the school as a whole.

As with all review and development, effective school self-evaluation should be a **continual process**, with interim checking through monitoring, evaluation and review of judgements. Data and information that feeds into all of the elements within the cycle must be up to date and appropriate, making a sound overall connected framework – a key factor for effectiveness.

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2.7 Communication and celebration

Apart from linking school self-evaluation into other planning procedures, celebrating success is another important feature which the Association would hope to see within relevant deliberations.

School self-evaluation should incorporate praise – not just for pupils, but also for staff and other contributors to the positive

success of the institution. In addition, dissemination of the summative evaluation to all key parties is vital, especially if they have participated in the process. This point is reinforced where involvement has been somewhat detached, for example by completing a questionnaire.

One danger can be the emergence of too many action points to be realistically helpful: prioritisation of the main issues at hand are a crucial part of following up the analysis.

2.8 Language and style

The Association appreciates that there is a tension between the criteria and regularised language used in standard documentation and a respect for local flexibility. On balance, there are distinct advantages in using a reasonable commonality in language and criteria. The benefit is that a degree of consistency and wide understanding is promoted, facilitating comparison. At the same time, it is hoped that the expected terminology does not become too prescriptive.

Indeed Ofsted expect a high level of commonality, noting in *The Handbook for Inspecting Secondary Schools*: “It is advantageous to base school self-evaluation on the same criteria as those used in all schools by inspectors. A common language has developed about the work of schools, expressed through the criteria. Teachers and governors know that the criteria reflect things that matter.” If an internal language does develop, there is an inherent danger of creating unnecessary mystery around documentation.

Given other incentives for aligning paperwork to Ofsted forms, the Association broadly agrees that it seems appropriate to maximise the use of Ofsted terminology, language

and criteria. At the same time, the issue of local ownership has to permit schools a degree of flexibility in using measurements and expressions that enjoy genuine internal currency.

“School self-evaluation should bring about a change in the culture of a school, helping to formalise and to extend other existing processes.”

The main aim should be to make all documentation as open and accessible as possible, no matter who the reader. A reasonable length is one factor, and the maximising of simplicity of approach is also highly significant. In the light of other workload pressures, time and resources are the main inhibitors to effective school self-evaluation, and therefore it is essential that technical terms are explained and acronyms clarified.

2.9 Cultural change

School self-evaluation should bring about a change in the culture of a school, helping to formalise and to extend other existing processes, (evaluating teaching and learning and data analysis, etc). It offers a basis for a whole-school evaluative approach to underpin reflection and sustainable change. In addition, the culture of a school is manifested in the methods and processes of evaluation used, including the degree of inclusivity and the degree of ownership that is sensed by all key stakeholders. Matters of the evidence base used, and the principles followed, provide a signal to the integrity of the overall process. The Association shares

the view that the culture of evaluation entails a continuous cyclical process, and that the ‘end product’ – in the form of a document – is only one small part of what is actually required.

2.10 Training provision

Rigorous self-evaluation and common understandings of processes will not become evident without considerable effort. Training on the principles and procedures of self-evaluation is an essential requirement for participants in the processes. LEAs have a particular role to play in training headteachers in the finer details of school self-evaluation. Equally, it is necessary for developmental work to be carried out in school for staff and for governors: no party involved in the processes should simply be expected to possess intrinsic skills to fulfil the requisite tasks.

3 Practical Benefits

Where these principles are embedded, several benefits are very likely to follow:

- 1** School self-evaluation is a significant indicator of a school's culture and performance. It is important to achieve clarity about the current state of a school, where it wants to get to and how it may get there. For recently-appointed headteachers, and indeed other parties, school self-evaluation provides a baseline understanding of the current work of the school.
- 2** Self-evaluation can help identify teachers' professional development needs and facilitate shared expertise between colleagues, as well as pinpointing whole organisational needs.
- 3** Inclusive processes which entail wide involvement and participation across the whole school community, with the role of governing bodies of particular note, lead to stronger 'ownership' of the school's aims and improvement strategies, with the whole school being able to develop its own agenda.
- 4** A sound framework provides schools with a range of tools and experiences which can enhance all evaluation activities. It is also clear that evaluating pupil learning can generate confidence and the same argument must be valid for school management.
- 5** Self-evaluation helps secure a culture which explains why things happen to internal and external stakeholders, defining what is expected of them and how to actually get there.
- 6** Self-evaluation provides a further evidence base of teachers' success, which is becoming a necessary part of progression within pay scales.
- 7** LEA officers generally find school self-evaluation processes valuable, both for themselves and for their schools. It forms one of the formal bases for initiating and maintaining close contact with schools and their staff, and the information generated helps to develop an overview of how schools are performing, helping to develop an overall picture of LEA performance. In turn, this can assist the planning of professional development and of educational development plan priorities.
- 8** School self-evaluation has the effect of informing and supporting the Ofsted inspection process in helping a school to 'know where it is at', particularly when the systems used are directly linked to inspection requirements.

4 Conclusions

Accountability processes need to encapsulate balances which respect institutional development, professional learning and public responsibilities. Traditionally, accountability systems have not paid sufficient attention to the sharing of institutional learning, though there are currently some encouraging developments in this direction with a greater emphasis now placed on effective networking.

Substantial quantities of useful and accessible information are generated through school self-evaluation, which can be used for a variety of practical purposes. The implications of existing data and improvement strategies in schools should be supported by promoting a public understanding of the detail, which requires adopting and defining an accessible language and presentation.

The contribution made by schools to their local community is increasingly understood and effective. Self-evaluation helps this to be successfully and intelligently channelled. A lack of self-awareness and self-understanding limits a schools' capacity to operate effectively on all fronts.

The key to effective self-evaluation demands communication at all stages of the process, together with the ability to measure progress in all of its forms. It is crucial to build sound processes, although ultimately the overriding question has to be 'does school self-evaluation make a positive difference?' The Association is convinced that, where it is conducted well, it does. Similarly the question, 'who is school self-evaluation for?' presents many dilemmas, but the prime value must be to the school itself, and in proposing a set of underlying principles, the Association is seeking ways which balance this, with the

outcomes being valuable to the knowledge base of the LEA and other interested parties as well.

School self-evaluation offers a focus for valuable reflection; it allows the opportunity to not just identify success and failure but also to learn from their causes – a vital principal for an intelligent school. The significance of **process** as well as **outcome** must therefore be stressed, and the principles outlined above represent the kind of features, in terms of methodology, which can lead to real professional learning through school self-evaluation. The detail of external moderation, broad-based participation, the use of precise evidence and performance measures, integrated planning, stylistic and cultural considerations and positive communication and follow-up, are all signals of overall quality.

5 Making Progress

In his notes for a syndicate group at the 2004 DfES/Ofsted Governors Conference, on 'Best Practice in School Self-Evaluation' Andy Reid, Ofsted's Head of School Improvement, commented: "Before 2001, when Form S4 was revised and Form S3 was introduced (Compliance Checklist), on average: 30% of self-evaluation reports have proven to be insightful, full evaluations, providing good insight and value for Ofsted; 40% of reports have been mixed, with some good evidence, but lacking in rigour and candour; 30% have been weak, poorly completed and have not conveyed insight into the school's strengths and weaknesses. Following the introduction of the revised Form S4 in 2001, the quality of self-evaluation has improved, but it is still variable."

The Association is therefore actively promoting the principles and practices advocated in this document, which will assist in attaining further improved quality of school self-evaluation, seen as a process of change within schools.

None of this is easy – no shortcuts exist – but the prize is well worth the effort.

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