

# An Overview of the Development and Implementation of a School Inspection System in the Cayman Islands

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## Introduction

The Cayman Islands Schools' Inspectorate was established in September 1996, to monitor and report to the Ministry of Education on educational standards in schools and "to contribute to their improvement". This mission reflects a central tension, which is not unique to the Cayman Islands inspection system: To what extent is school inspection a process of accountability, whereby society requires those working in schools to justify the quality of education they provide and the efficiency with which they use public funds? To what extent is school inspection a process for helping schools to improve? This tension, this paper proposes, has resonance and finds some resolution in a consideration of issues arising from the literature on research into internal and external approaches to school evaluation.

This paper discusses how the Cayman Islands school inspection model has been developed and implemented, both as a tool for accountability and school effectiveness and as a force for school improvement. It concludes with recommendations for some further steps that can be taken to better support and build on the contribution that inspection makes to the education system.

## School Improvement

There are many definitions of school improvement as a concept and as a process. Miles et al. (1987: 3) define school improvement "as a systematic, sustained effort aimed at change in learning conditions and other related internal conditions in one or more school with the ultimate aim of accomplishing education goals more effectively." Hopkins (1996: 32) offers two common interpretations: 'a common sense meaning which relates to general efforts to make school better places for students and [for] students to learn'; and a "strategy for educational change that enhances student outcomes as well as strengthening the school's capacity for managing change".

As Harris (2002: 11) points out, central to the second Hopkins' definition is the concept of school improvement 'as a process of changing school culture', where the school is 'the centre of changes and teachers ...[are] an intrinsic part of the change process.' This approach focuses on changing school culture rather than structure. She further argues that successful school improvement is dependent upon the school's ability to manage change and development, and concludes that "this necessitates building the 'capacity' for change and development within the school as an organization" (Harris 2002: 2).

Fullan (1992: 27) also emphasizes the intricate relationship between school improvement and change: 'successful school improvement ...depends on an understanding of the problem of change at the level of practice and the development of corresponding strategies for bringing about beneficial reforms (p. 27). Stoll and Fink (2002: 172) further argue that, in relation to monitoring and analysis, "the process of change" is as important as "its intended outcomes".

School improvement research places teaching and learning at the heart of efforts to achieve sustained school improvement. As Hopkins (2001: 2) suggests, "real" improvement "is best regarded as a strategy for educational change that focuses on student achievement by modifying classroom practice and adapting the management arrangements within the school to support teaching and learning".

Another key feature of school improvement is the view that it is unique to each school because each school's context is

unique. As Stoll and Fink (2002: 43) note, this means that "schools will address these processes in different ways and no blueprint can be proposed for all schools". A further logical step is to say that, ultimately, school improvement comes from within and cannot be externally mandated. However, this is not to say that a school can ignore its external environment; but rather a way of confirming the importance of schools making choices about the directions they will take towards school improvement (Stoll and Fink 2002).

## School Effectiveness

Although school improvement and school effectiveness are linked by a common ultimate aim, to enhance pupils' progress, achievement and development, they take different routes. For example, a key feature of school improvement research is a focus on the *processes* of schooling. For example, Stoll and Fink (2002: 43) suggest that school improvement is a series of *concurrent and recurring processes* in which a school:

- Enhances pupil outcomes
- Focuses on teaching and learning
- Builds the capacity to take charge of change regardless of its source
- Defines its own direction
- Assesses its current culture and works to develop positive cultural norms
- Has strategies to achieve its goals
- Addresses the internal conditions that enhance change
- Maintains momentum during periods of turbulence
- Monitors and evaluates its process, progress, achievement and development.

In contrast, a key feature of school effectiveness research is the demonstration of effectiveness in terms of *pupil outcomes*. In some countries the scope of effectiveness outcomes is very limited, with a reliance on a narrow scope of effectiveness outcomes and the use of standardized tests (Stoll and Fink: 2002) Such a limited view of educational effectiveness has been severely criticized and other measures have been added such as pupils' behaviour, attendance, delinquency, etc. Mortimore (1991: 9) summarises a recent broadening of the definition of effectiveness in recent research to include pupils' progress and the value added by schools to pupils' achievement:

An effective school is one in which pupils progress further than might be expected from consideration of its intake.

School effectiveness researchers' aim is to ascertain whether differences in resources, processes and organizational arrangements affect pupil outcomes, and if so, in what way. The identification of factors related to greater effectiveness in terms of pupils' progress, achievement and, in some cases, social development, is a key feature of many effectiveness studies. Figure 1 below provides a list of factors drawn a review of British and North American research literature, as reproduced in Stoll and Fink (2002: 27).

| Figure 1: Eleven Factors for Effective Schools |                                                                               |
|------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1. Professional Leadership                     | Firm and purposeful<br>A participative approach<br>The leading professional   |
| 2. shared vision and goals                     | Unity of purpose<br>Consistency of practice<br>Collegiality and collaboration |
| 3. a learning environment                      | An orderly atmosphere<br>An attractive working environment                    |
| 4. concentration on teaching and learning      | Maximisation of learning time<br>Academic emphasis<br>Focus on achievement    |
|                                                | High expectation all round                                                    |

|                                        |                                                                                         |
|----------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 5. high expectations                   | Communicating expectations<br>Providing intellectual challenge                          |
| 6. positive reinforcement              | Clear and fair discipline<br>Feedback                                                   |
| 7. monitoring progress                 | Monitoring pupil performance<br>Evaluating school performance                           |
| 8. pupils' rights and responsibilities | High pupil self esteem<br>Positions of responsibility<br>Control of work>               |
| 9. purposeful teaching                 | Efficient organization<br>Clarity of purpose<br>Structured lessons<br>Adaptive practice |
| 10. a learning organization            | School-based staff development                                                          |
| 11. home-school partnership            | Parental involvement                                                                    |

(Sammons et al. 1995)

## Linking School Improvement and School Effectiveness

As Macbeath and Mortimore (2001) explain, in the last two decades, school improvement and school effectiveness research have helped to validate the belief that schools can make a difference, and provided schools with information on the conditions and strategies that can lead to improved school effectiveness. It has also made important contributions to the debate on the importance of the *outcomes* of schooling as well as its *processes*.

However, school improvement and school effectiveness movements differ in methodology and purposes, and it is only recently that the two movements have been linked, in an effort to secure meaningful changes in schools and school systems (Stoll and Fink, 2002).

Stoll and Fink (2002: 62) suggest that the failure of many school improvement projects around the world can be attributed to the polarization of the two approaches:

A high proportion of school effectiveness efforts worldwide have collapsed because of resistance to the imposition of change.... Similarly, many school improvement projects have suffered because of a lack of focus on the important purposes of schooling, pupil outcomes and an inability to show "results". By combining these two fields, however, we have joined an outcomes orientation with a process to achieve change in our schools.

They also suggest that the focus of school effectiveness on certain outcomes as constants may not be as incompatible with the school improvement approach as might first be thought. Instead, the effectiveness factors can be considered "a framework within which the more changing elements of schooling can operate" (p. 32).

They further propose that school development planning offers an effective mechanism for helping schools to bring school effectiveness and school improvement approaches together, if it operates as a tool which enables them to balance 'increased school autonomy with national, provincial or state government controls (p. 64). Such a planning model, they propose, would have the following purposes:

- improving teaching and learning
- incorporating and interpreting external policy requirements
- meeting government legislation commitments to parents
- a monitoring and accountability device for school districts

- a means to coordinate district support
- a management tool for principals to control their budget.

## Internal and External School Evaluation

A related debate centres around approaches to school evaluation. Is school effectiveness and improvement best supported by internal (school self-assessment or evaluation) or external evaluations (such as those posed by inspection)?

The following provides a basic distinction between the two approaches:

School self-evaluation is commonly seen as a process of school evaluation which is performed by at least part of the school's stakeholders-management, staff, pupils, and parents. It is opposed to "external evaluation" where the judgement on the school is delivered by external agents (Meuret and Morlaix 2003: 53).

MacBeath and Mortimore (2001: 198) point out criticisms can be leveled at self-evaluation as "soft and lacking rigour.... It can be complacent, defensive or self-congratulatory". However, they argue, if it is implemented "in the fullest and most inclusive sense" it can be more rigorous and searching than any external approach". Proponents of external evaluations highlight objectivity as a key strength. However, as Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars (1993: 114-115) warn, the problem with "objectivity" is that those who claim to have it believe they need to look no further, need listen to no one else, and never alter their convictions. They have the "data" as the "givens".

Stoll and Fink (2002) argue that we do not have to choose one or the other, but that systems can blend internal and external evaluation and thus combine the best features of both. The usefulness of this is illustrated in a practical way in a selection from their list of "assumptions about change" (p. 45):

- A mix of pressure and support is needed. People need help and encouragement when relearning is at stake. Particularly important are assistance, training in new skills, and follow-up help.
- "Top-down, bottom-up" change engenders more commitment and continuation than either an autocratic, centralized approach or a laissez-faire decentralized approach.

However, at the same time they argue that the ultimate aim of external evaluations should be to put increasing responsibility for quality in the hands of the schools. Macbeath (1998), in discussing the external perspective provided by someone in the role of "a critical friend" of a school, makes a similar point. He proposes that that "a touchstone question" for the critical friend should be, "Will this help to develop independence, the capacity to learn and to apply learning more effectively over time?" (p. 131).

## Key Features of the Cayman Islands School Inspection System

### Roles and Responsibilities

School inspections by trained inspectors came about as result of the National Education Plan, 1995-1999. As the developers of this plan were drawn from members of the teaching force and community, the concept of inspection was introduced as a bottom-up initiative and not as a mandate handed down from the government. The Schools' Inspectorate was established in 1996 as an independent unit of the Ministry of Education, and introduced the first cycle of inspections in September 1997. Its work is guided by the following strategic objectives:

- to deliver high quality inspections and reports on government and private educational institutions, within a regular and agreed cycle, and in full compliance with an agreed code of practice and published criteria;
- to provide training courses for schools, which are relevant and effectively delivered, to support the successful implementation of the self-assessment and inspection processes, and complement training provided by the Education Department;

- to provide high quality advice, based on inspection findings, to assist in the formulation, implementation and evaluation of government policy.

The Inspectorate's role and responsibilities within the education system are complemented by those of the Education Department, a separate government department, which is responsible for the administration of the education system and for helping schools to improve, including responding to inspection findings.

## Nature and scope of inspections

Inspection is mandatory for government schools; private schools are currently inspected at the request of their Boards of Governors. School inspections are carried out once every six years for each school. Three years after the initial inspection, there is a formal monitoring (post-inspection) visit to check on the progress the school has made in tackling the priority areas identified during the initial inspection. Parents and the general public have access to the findings of each inspection, through the publication of the summary inspection reports.

The Inspectorate also carries out short inspection visits at the request of the Ministry of Education or the Education Department. It also prepares reports which provide a national picture of all schools or a sample of schools. These include theme reports (summarizing inspection findings over a given period) and reports from survey inspections (inspections focusing on a priority area in all schools or a sample of schools).

## Inspection Teams

Inspection teams include a combination of Inspectorate staff, overseas inspectors (to provide an international perspective to the evaluations) and local Occasional Inspectors (staff from local schools who are trained by the Inspectorate, and who provide a local perspective and recent experience of working in Cayman Islands schools). Inspectors must comply within a code of conduct that emphasizes a developmental and supportive approach in their interactions with school staff. For example, inspectors are expected to establish positive working relationships with school staff, to provide opportunities and a climate for professional dialogue and an exchange of ideas. They are also expected to give as much emphasis to what individual staff and the school do well as to what needs to be improved.

## Inspection Criteria

The inspectors' work is guided by the areas of focus, criteria and indicators of best practice in the *Cayman Islands Handbook for the Self-Assessment and Inspection of Schools*. The areas reviewed during an inspection are laid out below in Figure 2.

| Figure 2: Areas of Focus in the Cayman Islands School Evaluation Framework |                                                                                                                                                |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Pupil Outcomes                                                             |                                                                                                                                                |
| The Effectiveness of Pupils' Learning                                      | The pupils' achievements and the progress they make in their learning, their competence as learners and their attitudes to learning            |
| Pupils' Personal Development                                               | Pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development                                                                                      |
| Standards of Achievement                                                   | The standards achieved by pupils in externally accredited examinations and their class work, in relation to expectations for their age         |
| Pupil Attendance and Punctuality                                           | The levels and patterns of pupils' attendance and punctuality, and any significant links between attendance, punctuality and pupil performance |
| School Provision                                                           |                                                                                                                                                |
| The Effectiveness of the Teaching                                          | The contributions made to enhancing pupils' learning and personal development and to raising standards of achievement                          |
|                                                                            |                                                                                                                                                |

|                                       |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
|---------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Leadership and Management             | The contributions made by leadership and management at all levels to school improvement and effectiveness                                                                                                                                                                     |
| The Curriculum and Assessment         | The quality and management of the curriculum, in terms of how well the curricular opportunities provided meet the needs and interests of all the pupils;<br>The school's use of assessment to support pupils' learning and to guide the further development of the curriculum |
| Support, Guidance and Pupils' Welfare | The school's arrangements for supporting and guiding the academic progress and personal development of its pupils, including their emotional well being, and for promoting their health, safety and welfare                                                                   |
| Links with Parents and the Community  | The way the school develops and uses its links with parents and the community to support, complement or extend its provision for pupils' learning and their personal development                                                                                              |
| Subjects                              | Learning, standards, teaching, curriculum and assessment and leadership and management and any other significant factors in the subjects inspected                                                                                                                            |
| National Initiatives                  | Strengths and areas for improvement in the school's implementation of a national initiative or school-improvement project                                                                                                                                                     |

Reports

Inspection reports identify a school's key strengths and areas for improvement. They also provide a clear steer as to what action the school needs to take to move forward. These "next steps" draw on ideas generated by the school's staff at a planning session following the oral report on the inspection findings, which is facilitated by the inspection team. Members of staff from the Education Department attend the feedback and planning sessions.

Action-Plans

Schools are required to prepare an action plan to show how they will address the areas for improvement identified. It is expected that these action plans will be tackled within the context of a School Improvement Plan (to be introduced in the 2004-05 academic year), which will also consider national priorities as well as priorities identified by the school through an ongoing self-assessment process.

Schools' Self-Assessment

Self-assessment is an important part of the Cayman Islands school evaluation model and aims to involve schools in a central way in the evaluation process, by placing the tools of evaluation in their hands, to complement the external perspective of the school provided by inspection. Inspectors work with schools prior to an inspection to familiarise staff with the inspection model and the Handbook which guides the inspection process, and to assist them in establishing, and maintaining, beyond the inspection period, systems and processes to evaluate and report on aspects of its work. Schools are encouraged to use the criteria and indicators of best practice to assist them in evaluating their work.

The school's self-assessment report and other information from the school are used as important steers for the inspection team. It is anticipated that the strengths of a school's internal quality assurance systems is to be the basis for determining the nature and frequency of inspections in the future.

Training

The Inspectorate provides a range of training courses to support the building of internal capacity for improvement in the education system. These include self-assessment, action planning, an annual Senior Management Conference, and its most ambitious project to date, a National Educational Leadership Programme (NELP) for serving and aspiring principals, which was developed in partnership with the Ministry of Education, the Education Department and the

London Leadership Centre in the UK.

## Discussion

To what extent, then, is school inspection in the Cayman Islands a process of accountability? To what extent is it a process for helping schools to improve? What contributions can the literature review make to this debate?

There are important aspects of the Inspectorate's work that have a clear accountability orientation and contribute to openness and transparency within the education system:

- schools are inspected within a regular cycle, against a comprehensive set of criteria and indicators.
- detailed reports of the findings are prepared on each school, identifying key strengths and areas for improvement, and summaries are published for parents and the general public.

In practice, inspection findings from the first cycle of inspections have provided a comprehensive and detailed view of the strengths and weaknesses of individual schools in the Cayman Islands. With the production of theme reports, the Inspectorate has begun to extrapolate from the findings to identify strengths and weakness on a national basis, in areas such as teaching and learning, curriculum and assessment, special educational needs and literacy. A survey inspection in February 2004 provided the first comprehensive review of the nature and quality of technical and vocational education in government high schools.

However, the literature review suggests that a fuller and more appropriate view of inspection is say that it is about *school effectiveness*. This allows one to acknowledge the accountability aspects of inspection, while also recognizing other key features. For example, the criteria against which judgements are made are not narrowly defined, but encompass a range of pupil outcomes, including pupils' learning, personal development, attendance and punctuality, as well as the standards of achievement. They also draw on both quantitative and qualitative data. In addition, school inspection in the Cayman Islands combines a focus on pupil outcomes with an evaluation of the contributions made to pupils' learning by a range of aspects of school provision. These aspects, and the criteria by which they are evaluated, are consistent with the research findings on effective schools.

To say that inspection is just about school effectiveness, however, is also limiting, as it implies that inspection is just an end in itself. On the contrary, there are many key aspects of the Cayman Islands inspection system that have a clear school improvement orientation:

- school staff and other stakeholders have been consulted on the inspection criteria and indicators, and on the revisions made to the inspection model for the second cycle of inspections;
- schools are not ranked and inspectors do not report on individual *teachers*, but identify strengths and areas for improvement in the effectiveness of the *teaching*;
- Inspectors must comply with a code of conduct that emphasizes a developmental and supportive approach to their work with schools;
- schools are involved in a central way in the evaluation process, through self-assessment. In addition, the strength of a school's systems for self-review is to be the basis for determining the nature and frequency of inspections in the future;
- in addition to providing feedback on how effective a school is, inspection reports also provide a clear steer for the school on what it needs to do to improve. Also, the strategies for improvement identified are the result of a collaborative process of inspectors working with school staff;
- staff from local schools are trained as occasional inspectors. One obvious aim is to develop a resource of inspectors with direct and recent experience of working in our schools. Another aim is to develop in these individuals, skills and expertise that they can feed back into their own schools to bring about improvements;
- the Inspectorate provides a range of other training courses to support the building of internal capacity for improvement in the education system.

It is also important to acknowledge the phenomenon that what gets measured or assessed gets valued. When inspections were first introduced, schools could be characterised as:

- out of touch with current research and development in the fields of evaluation and organizational developments;
- seeing inspection by the Schools' Inspectorate as the primary and singular source for the evaluation and validation of school quality;
- without the benefit of systematic criteria or tools for evaluating the quality of school culture or organizational development.

*The Cayman Islands Handbook for the Self-Assessment and Inspection of Schools* established standards and expectations for pupil performance and the work of school in key areas. Inspection encouraged schools to become familiar with them and to value them. Six years on, the picture presented above has definitely begun to change for the better, although school improvement and accountability are still seen, to too great an extent, as jobs of the Schools' Inspectorate, and few schools have embraced self-assessment as an essential process in their day-to-day work.

Although it is difficult to isolate the impact of inspection from the many other factors that influence school improvement, anecdotal evidence and inspection findings suggest that, for some schools and individuals, inspection has helped to improve practice. For example, the preparation for inspection has often forced schools to look critically at their practice and to make positive changes. During an inspection, ongoing discussions with the principal and teachers have been seen to bring about significant shifts in practice. In some cases, schools have improved in some areas *during* an inspection. There are examples of initiatives undertaken by occasional inspectors and participants in the National Educational Leadership Programme

Inspection findings from the first cycle of inspections also suggest that, across schools, there is some evidence of:

- progress towards creating a culture in which everyone takes responsibility for pupil achievement;
- a greater acceptance and understanding of the link between teaching and learning, and of the characteristics of effective teaching;
- a move away from the concept of the principal as administrator to principal as the leading professional in our schools.

Nevertheless, although inspection in the Cayman Islands can be considered an important force for school improvement, there are important aspects that are beyond its current scope. For example, the literature indicates that school improvement is as much about strengthening a school's *capacity for managing change* as it is about *developing strategies for educational change* to enhance student outcomes. This suggests the need for, for example, system support for school development, to provide a range of staff development activities, research support and resources, and so on. The literature also emphasises that there are important aspects of school improvement that must be owned and led by the schools themselves. In addition, while inspection has attempted to act as a stimulus for developing strong internal school evaluation systems, the institutionalization of self-assessment will depend on wider, systemic changes and ongoing support that cannot be provided within the context of the inspection process.

## Conclusions

School inspection in the Cayman Islands is a process for accountability/school effectiveness. It is also about helping schools to improve. Recent trends in research suggests that such links between school improvement and school effectiveness, at both system and school levels, are important for securing meaningful and lasting change in individual schools and in the education system as a whole.

However, it is also evident that there are limits to the contributions inspection can make, and, thus opportunities for other agencies and schools themselves to play important and complementary roles in the school improvement process. In the context of the Cayman Islands, where there is both an Inspectorate body and an Education Department, it is important to make clear distinctions between school effectiveness and school improvement, and the nature of the contributions to be made by each department in these two areas.

One important step forward would be to develop a school effectiveness and improvement policy for the Cayman Islands, which would provide a conceptual framework within which these matters could be tackled. Such a policy

could usefully include:

- working definitions of school effectiveness and school improvement, which illustrate both their distinctive and common features;
- statements as to how these processes will contribute to the achievement of national goals and objectives for education;
- roles and responsibilities of all within the education sector for school effectiveness and school improvement, and how they complement one another.
- Criteria for monitoring and evaluating the impact and implementation of the policy.

Developing a mechanism for helping schools to bring school effectiveness and school improvement approaches together, as the literature has suggested, is vital. The proposed School Improvement Planning process may provide such a mechanism. To do so it will need to enable schools to balance their obligations to external priorities (including policy requirements and inspection findings) with the need to strengthen their own capacity for managing change and development within the school and to define their own directions. It will also be vital for the model to ensure that support for teaching and learning remain at the heart of any school improvement strategies.

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