

Robson Davison

Strong school leadership, partnerships, and involving parents and communities are part of Northern Ireland's extended school and school improvement strategy. **Robson Davison**, Deputy Secretary, Schools and Youth Policy in Northern Ireland, talks about the challenges and hopes.



Welcome to *Schools ETC*, Robson. Can you tell us how you see extended schools improving standards in Northern Ireland? And what drivers will sustain the extended schools agenda?

School improvement here faces a range of barriers, including those arising from disadvantage and from working out the divisions in our society; also, perhaps, there's been too little challenge to all schools about performance.

We're tackling improvement on two fronts. First: we are introducing a Revised Curriculum, and revised literacy and numeracy strategies. Our 1998 strategy didn't achieve all we'd hoped – the responsibility of schools for raising standards wasn't clear enough. So now, we want schools to take more ownership of their standards, their direction and curriculum content. The Revised Curriculum gives schools more influence over what they teach by reducing the amount of statutory content; and it emphasises skills, particularly communications, numeracy, ICT, team-working and the ability to work independently. Second: we're emphasising developing children as individuals through an approach to 'emotional health and well-being' and reviewing special educational needs provision.

I see extended schools as spanning both these aspects of our improvement strategy. Both will help improve educational outcomes in different ways – and complement each other. Our principals are already innovating – for example: broadening the curriculum in new directions; involving parents; and introducing other professional services as extended school initiatives. And, that innovation will be recognised as a mark of an improving school.

About drivers: although the Ten Year Children's Strategy doesn't have statutory teeth, I don't see that as significant. Equality is the strong driver in Northern Ireland. We've tailored funding towards schools serving disadvantaged areas, which recognises the differences in our education system and should help close gaps – for example, the continuation of selection at age 11 and the fact that some schools serve areas where parents can and do fund additional activities.

What are your views about schools that find it difficult to involve parents?

Some parents may be hard-to-reach and schools recognise the constraints only too well. But many schools are well grounded in their communities and with parents. Ours is a small system, so those connections can be made easily. Previously, we've avoided saying how schools should work with parents. But extended schools offer many opportunities to connect with parents and the wider community, so I suspect schools will develop good practice that we can disseminate.

This strategy in Northern Ireland often seems equated with out-of-school activities. Are schools developing partnerships to offer other extended services, particularly to address child poverty?

Remember, we're still emerging from difficult times, when many schools would have been perceived as the oases of peace and calm in their communities, and didn't naturally form partnerships. In the first year, we've targeted funding at areas of disadvantage, grounded the extended schools policy with support and engaged the schools. We've encouraged school clusters and we have individual 'green shoots' that we can nurture, where schools are working either with voluntary bodies, community organisations or even statutory bodies. But it's not the norm yet. In future, we may be more directive about partnerships. Schools and the Boards are recording what they're doing and we'll also ask the Inspectorate for an evaluation.

Targeting funding at areas of disadvantage and engaging parents and communities will help with child poverty. There's a strong community base in Northern Ireland and relationships within their nets of community support, I think, give many schools powerful opportunities to alleviate child poverty. Children come to school with lots of barriers to learning – I guess they always did – and their teachers, principals and the pastoral care system can address some – but not all – within the school day.

So, the long-term goal is that extended schools will make connections with statutory and voluntary health and other providers to bring support right into the schools for children and families who really need it – giving them more joined-up services. In the first year, we've been careful not to be prescriptive, lean too heavily or set tight timelines, so schools can develop what they see as important. The Minister wants to trust professionals more and trust schools about curriculum matters. But, at some point, and it's a judgement call about when and how, we may have to more directly emphasise addressing poverty, links with parents, community links, health links.

We know we're asking a lot. We're asking school leaders to engage actively over curriculum content, standards and school improvement in a very direct way, and with self-evaluation in a very robust and structured way because at the heart of our school improvement policy are self-evaluation and self-improvement. However, I'm very confident in our present cohort of leaders.

Due to the way data are collected in some authorities here, it's difficult to know if services are reaching disadvantaged groups. How are your schools approaching monitoring and evaluation?

Generally, we want schools to use data within all their activities to help address the issues we've discussed here, to see what's working and what isn't. So, if they're using resources through extended schools to promote certain things, they'll need to show measurable effects, as well as anecdotal. That's the direction, as this policy embeds in schools.

Already established extended services – breakfast clubs, after-school clubs – have raised parents' and communities' expectations. Can your schools plan ahead with confidence?

I think we'll secure funding, probably not at existing levels, but enough to continue supporting schools in the worst areas of disadvantage.

But, the conundrum remains. Is it more appropriate to accept the value of schools taking these developments forward, in whatever way they feel is appropriate to their local circumstances, and, indeed, encourage them to innovate further? Or, would it be better to emphasise more sharply and directly some of the issues we've discussed here. The answer may be a blend of both approaches.

- The ETC *know-how* insert In this issue *Making sense of self-evaluation* offers practical approaches to self-evaluation and improvement.