School self-evaluation

Thinkpiece
School self-evaluation

In this module you will explore:
-
the strategic significance of school self-evaluation
-
what school self-evaluation is
-
monitoring and evaluation
-
from school self-evaluation to school improvement
-
using self-evaluation for accountability

School self-evaluation has always existed in different forms but took on a new significance in 2005 when Ofsted introduced the self-evaluation form (SEF) as part of the New Relationship with Schools (NRwS). The guidance pointed out that the SEF was intended to be a part of ongoing school self-improvement. It was, however, sometimes regarded as time-consuming and bureaucratic. It has now been withdrawn. In the words of the 2010 white paper:

We are also removing the expectation on every school to complete a centrally designed self-evaluation form. We strongly support the view that good schools evaluate themselves rigorously. But we do not believe that imposing a very long form in a standard format, which requires consideration of many issues which may be of limited importance to a particular school, helps schools to evaluate themselves in a focused way against their priorities.

HM Government, 2010:29

What are the implications of this for schools? In fact, self-evaluation is more important than ever in the current policy context. In this module we will consider the strategic significance of school self-evaluation and your role as a senior leader in leading and managing self-evaluation in your school.

Taking the policy context as our starting point, a specific aim of the government’s policy is to create an increasingly self-sustaining and self-improving system, relying less on central government intervention and more on school leaders, teachers and parents themselves to ensure a good quality of education for all. As preparation for the module, you may like to read chapter 7 of the 2010 white paper (HM Government, 2010), which sets out the government’s plans in detail. The white paper makes it clear that schools themselves have responsibility for improvement:

our aim should be to support the school system to become more effectively self-improving. The primary responsibility for improvement rests with schools, and the wider system should be designed so that our best schools and leaders can take on greater responsibility, leading improvement work across the system.

HM Government, 2010:13

Self-evaluation contributes to school improvement by providing an accurate assessment of how well the school is performing and what it needs to do next. It leads to the identification of improvement priorities and to evidence-based school improvement planning, which results in clear benefits for pupils.

Another important aspect of government policy with which self-evaluation is linked is the decision to give schools greater autonomy in order to achieve improved performance. This approach is underpinned by research evidence from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and others that giving greater autonomy to individual schools helps raise standards. The increased freedom goes hand-in-hand with making schools more accountable to their stakeholders, including parents and carers and the pupils themselves.

Self-evaluation is at the centre of accountability and provides the basis for reporting to stakeholders on the school’s performance. This is because schools that understand their own strengths and weaknesses are better placed to account effectively to their stakeholders for their performance.
In the module we will explore what self-evaluation is and how it is led and managed at whole-school level and by senior leaders, including examples of good practice. This will take us on to considering what is entailed in monitoring and evaluation, including understanding and using data of all kinds. Effective use of pupil performance data is an essential part of the school improvement process and a key lever for change. You will consider the use of data from external sources such as RAISEonline and the data the school itself collects. You will consider how to analyse and interpret both quantitative and qualitative data.

You will explore how the school can use self-evaluation to identify its strengths and weaknesses, set its strategic direction and identify its priorities and how this should lead naturally into the school’s improvement plan. This in turn is linked to making decisions about the school’s budget and the allocation of resources. The school’s priorities should inform the staff’s objectives so that all members of staff have a stake in the school’s success and can be held accountable for their part in the school improvement plan.

Unlike external evaluation, which is provided mainly through Ofsted inspection and usually only takes place at key stages, school self-evaluation is essentially a formative process. It is a continuous cycle that focuses on the quality of provision and its impact on pupils’ achievement. To be effective, it has to take place on an ongoing basis and be fully integrated into the school’s leadership and management activities. Its purpose is to help the school make judgements, to improve effectiveness and to inform decisions. It is pointless if its results are not used.

You will explore the relationship between Ofsted inspection and school self-evaluation. Overall, the aim of the inspection framework is to focus on teaching and learning and to generate evidence on this through direct observation of teaching and pupils’ work. Inspectors take account of the accuracy of the school’s self-evaluation. In order to align their self-evaluation with the Ofsted framework for inspection, many schools choose to organise their self-evaluation processes around Ofsted’s requirements, which are set out in the Framework for school inspection (Ofsted, 2012).

In School self-evaluation: Background, principles and key learning, John Macbeath (2005) invites school leaders to reflect critically on the following questions as a means of establishing their own perspective on the purposes of school self-evaluation:

- Why are we doing this?
- Who is this for?
- What is the best structure?
- How are we to judge?
- What do we do?
- What are the tools for the job?
- What does the final product look like?
Schools use a variety of models for self-evaluation. You will consider models for school self-evaluation and compare them with the one used in your school. If you are in an academy chain, it is possible that your self-evaluation model and its associated processes are shared with other schools across the chain. It may be different again if you are in a federation or a teaching school where you are working in partnership with other schools.

For example, in The growth of academy chains (Hill et al, 2012), the authors found that all chains give a high priority to target-setting, tracking and performance monitoring. Chains apply quality assurance procedures not just to support continuous improvement but also to ensure consistency and manage risk. Collaborative converter chains were also engaged in or planning joint school improvement activity. Another distinctive characteristic of the governance of chains was found to be the extent to which there is a focus on monitoring performance.

In Towards a self-improving system: the role of school accountability, Christine Gilbert (2012) reported that in her visits to first-tranche teaching schools, all the schools:

- expected teachers to be accountable for the quality of teaching and the impact it was having on the learning of individual pupils
- were creating strong professional communities, where peer learning was central and focused on the detail of practice and pedagogy
- used school-to-school support to strengthen their review of practice and pedagogy
- were engaging pupils in reviewing their own learning
- targeted resources flexibly to meet both pupil and staff needs
- were giving regular accounts to parents of their children’s progress
- gave regular accounts to governing bodies about progress and performance at school level and, increasingly, about the progress and performance of the schools with which they were working

These are all themes that you will follow up in the module.

For self-evaluation to be effective, the school has to have effective systems of accountability in place that are rigorously maintained, for example through a clear management and reporting structure and clearly defined roles among the staff whose objectives will be derived from the school’s priorities. You will consider ways of leading and managing self-evaluation in your area of responsibility, including how to hold staff accountable for high standards.

Two fundamental questions lie at the heart of school self-evaluation: ‘How well are we doing?’ and ‘How can we do better?’

How would you answer these questions for your area of responsibility? What evidence do you need to collect?

It is very likely that your school’s quality indicators are based on the four areas covered by the Ofsted framework for inspection:

- achievement of pupils at the school
- quality of teaching in the school
- behaviour and safety of pupils at the school
- quality of leadership in and management of the school
The document poses an important question that is worth bearing in mind: ‘It’s okay to ask questions, but what are you going to do with the answers?’ (National College & Secondary Heads Association, 2005, p.16)

School self-evaluation is often considered a waste of time because insufficient time has been spent clarifying the purpose of the activity, deciding the methods that will be used for collecting the data, and how long it will take and, importantly, what is to happen to the data and information once collected. You can avoid these pitfalls by preparing carefully and ensuring that staff have the time as well as the knowledge and skills to undertake the activity and the support needed to complete it.

**Analysis of practice**

As preparation for the module, start to think about self-evaluation in your school. The headteacher is responsible for the overall success of the school and for ensuring that the work and overall effectiveness of the school are evaluated.

What are the roles of the senior leadership team, senior leaders, middle leaders, teachers and non-teaching staff in self-evaluation?

What is your role in self-evaluation and to whom do you report?

What key questions do you think you should be asking about your area of responsibility?

What data and evidence do you routinely collect in your area of responsibility and why? Can you justify the purpose of their collection? How do you know the data is reliable?

Who collates the results and how are they communicated?

How do the results inform decision-making and setting priorities in your area of responsibility and at whole-school level?

What do you think works well in self-evaluation in your area of responsibility and in the school as a whole? Is there anything you would like to change? Why?

Record your observations in your blog and refer to them as you progress through the module. You may wish to discuss them with other senior leaders and with colleagues in your area of responsibility.
Structured reflection

In preparation for the module, read School self-evaluation: A reflection and planning guide for school leaders (National College & SHA, 2005), then focus on p7, in particular:

Developing the appropriate climate is essential in terms of securing and embedding genuine self-evaluation. John Dunford highlights for example the need to include staff, especially middle leaders, in data interpretation and progress-tracking to inform aspects such as raising expectations, curriculum reform and the personalisation of learning.

Where would you say your school stood in relation to developing the ‘climate for evaluation’?
What could you do to improve it?

Record your observations in your blog. You may find it useful to discuss them with your colleagues.

In your work on self-evaluation, as a senior leader you will no doubt need to engage with staff at every level: the senior leadership team, other senior leaders, the middle leaders you line manage, and teachers and non-teaching staff. Middle leaders in particular have considerable influence on the quality of provision and on pupil outcomes. It is worth spending some time reflecting on what their contribution is to the process and how you as a senior leader engage with them for self-evaluation.

Systematic monitoring and evaluation are a crucial part of school self-evaluation. In Twenty outstanding primary schools: Excelling against the odds, Ofsted (2009) stresses the importance of ‘relentless monitoring and evaluation’. You will consider how monitoring and evaluation are carried out both in the context of the whole school and in your own area of responsibility. You will consider how to meet statutory requirements in reporting to Ofsted, parents and carers and the governing body. You will explore the use and the limitations of performance data in evaluating academic performance and consider how to evaluate aspects of the school for which the data is qualitative rather than quantitative and considered more difficult to analyse and interpret.

You will look at the important role that data of all kinds, quantitative and qualitative, plays in monitoring and evaluation. Effective use of data on pupil performance is an essential part of the school improvement process and can be considered one of the key levers for change. Data helps to pose and answer questions about:

- current standards
- trends over time
- progress made by individuals and groups

‘Using data, improving schools’ (Ofsted, 2008) provides a useful introduction to the use of data and its limitations. (You should be aware, however, that contextual value-added (CVA) data has since been removed from RAISEonline.) There are a number of key external sources of data of which the most powerful are those relating to the performance of pupils. They are used for reporting to the governing body and parents, for school improvement planning and for comparison between schools. Sources you will no doubt be familiar with are:

- Reporting and Analysis for Improvement through School Self-Evaluation (RAISEonline)
- Fischer Family Trust (FFT) analyses to support self-evaluation
- Early Years Foundation Stage Profile (EYFSP)
As part of this section of the module you will spend some time studying the National College’s guide to understanding and using data, including a practical guide for school leaders who wish to make more effective use of performance data.

If you are in a small primary school, you may face particular challenges in finding sufficient resources to undertake data analysis and interpretation, so you can use the evidence to the school’s best advantage. The number of pupils on roll also sometimes means that statistical comparisons are insufficiently reliable because of the size of the yearly cohort. Special schools sometimes face particular challenges in self-evaluation because of the nature of the data available to them. You will have the opportunity to follow these points up in the module.

You and your stakeholders will want to know about much more than academic performance. You will want, for example, to know about pupils’ personal and social development. These areas are, of course, of considerable importance to parents, for whom academic performance is only one measure of a school’s provision. For this you will need qualitative data, possibly collected through surveys and questionnaires.

In this section of the module, you will explore how self-evaluation contributes to school improvement and school improvement planning both within your own area of responsibility and across the school. You will carry out a review of practice in your own area of responsibility in order to see what practical steps you can take to ensure that self-evaluation leads to genuine improvement.

In research carried out by CfBT, From self-evaluation to school improvement: the importance of effective staff development, the researchers (2008) found that there was a great deal of lesson observation happening in all the case study schools. Where it made a difference, it was a platform for discussing specific learning and teaching. Staff development that involved discussing, coaching, mentoring, observing and training others was found to be highly effective.

The key research question for the researchers was:

What practical steps can schools take to ensure that self-evaluation of their practice and performance leads, through the effective development of their staff, to genuine improvement?

How would you answer that question for your school and for your area of responsibility?

It was mentioned earlier that the greater autonomy given to schools in order to help raise standards goes hand-in-hand with accountability to the school’s stakeholders and the community. This section of the module draws on chapter 6 of the schools white paper, (HM Government, 2010) on Accountability.

There is now a consensus that schools are publicly accountable as providers of a public service and that the main consequence of the accountability system should be school improvement. You will consider how to account to the different stakeholders for the school’s performance: the governing body, parents and carers, the local authority if you are in a maintained school, your colleagues and your pupils.

For example, you will consider what information and data the governing body need in order to fulfil their role and your role as a senior leader in providing the information and data they require either directly or through the headteacher.

Schools already report regularly to parents and carers and, in fact, there are statutory requirements for reporting to parents. There is now a commitment on the part of government to ensure that parents have greater access to good-quality data.
Increasingly, schools are realising the importance of listening and responding to their stakeholders’ views and taking account of them in their self-evaluation. For some time, many schools have been aware of the value of listening to the pupil voice and are increasingly taking notice of pupils’ evidence, for example, on the impact of teaching on their learning.

**Structured reflection**

On p7 of School self-evaluation: A reflection and planning guide for school leaders, Dunford (2005) mentions the importance of ‘developing a climate for external stakeholder contributions’.

Think about this in the context of your own school:

− Which stakeholders would you want to involve in evaluation?
− What would you want them to do?
− What might be the benefits and concerns in doing this?
− How would you hold different stakeholder groups to account for their role in the process?

Discuss your opinions with your colleagues. To what extent are you and your colleagues in agreement? Where are the points of difference?

**Conclusion**

In this thinkpiece, we have touched on the key strategic role of school self-evaluation in helping the school identify its strengths and weaknesses, set its priorities and plan for improvement. We have seen that it is central to effective accountability in providing evidence for reporting to the school’s stakeholders on its performance.

The six tests of effective self-evaluation proposed in ‘A new relationship with schools’ (DfES & Ofsted, 2005) cover the key points addressed in the module:

− It asks the most important questions about pupils’ learning, achievements and development.
− It uses a range of telling evidence to answer these questions.
− It benchmarks the school’s and pupils’ performance against the best comparable schools.
− It involves staff, pupils, parents and the governing body at all levels.
− It is integral to the school’s central systems for assessing and developing pupils and for managing and developing staff.
− It leads to action.

**Analysis of practice**

Consider to what extent self-evaluation in your school meets these tests. If it does not, how could they be addressed? What would your role in that be?
References


National College, 2012, Understanding and using data, Nottingham, National College for School Leadership


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