



A Guide to

**Incidental Inspection in Second-Level Schools
and Centres for Education**



**AN ROINN DEPARTMENT OF
OIDEACHAIS EDUCATION
AGUS SCILEANNA AND SKILLS
INSPECTORATE**

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1. Introduction

1.1. What are incidental inspections?

Incidental inspection is one of a number of external school evaluation models used by the Inspectorate of the Department of Education and Skills to evaluate the quality and effectiveness of aspects of the education provided in second-level schools and centres for education, and to provide advice and support to teachers, principals and school management.

- Incidental inspections are evaluations of aspects of the work of a school¹ under the normal conditions of a regular school day. No notice is provided to schools in advance of an incidental inspection
- They are usually short one-day inspections conducted by one inspector and they focus on aspects of teaching, learning, students' achievement, and support for pupils
- Incidental inspections involve a combination of evaluation and advice and support for schools and teachers and they take particular account of the quality of the educational provision experienced by the learner
- The inspection typically involves evaluation of teaching and learning during a number of lesson periods throughout the school day. Around five lesson periods will normally be involved
- The lessons to be evaluated are selected by the inspector during the first period of the school day and the teachers of the classes to be visited are notified at that time
- The inspection visits may focus on teaching and learning in one subject or may cover a number of different curriculum areas or programmes during the course of the school day
- Time is set aside for oral feedback and discussion with the teachers whose lessons have been observed and with the school principal or deputy principal where the principal is absent.

Incidental inspections involve less formal inspection procedures than whole-school type evaluations. The model complements other inspection processes, and evaluation visits do not normally result in a written report to the school.

1.2 Who will benefit from incidental inspection?

Incidental inspection will provide a number of benefits to schools, teachers and students.

At school level, incidental inspections support the educational leadership role of the principal by providing the opportunity for professional dialogue with inspectors on matters of particular interest to the school. The inspector's oral feedback can be used to assist schools to identify strengths in educational provision and facilitate professional reflection on aspects requiring further development. In this way, incidental inspections complement the school's own self-evaluation processes.

Incidental inspection supports co-professional engagement between teachers and the inspector. The inspector's time is given to direct observation of teaching and learning as it transacts at the classroom level with a view to affirming the work of teachers and students and supporting improvement. Incidental inspections provide opportunities for the teacher to discuss issues relevant to the lesson and to seek advice from the inspector.

A distinctive feature of incidental inspection is the facility it provides to gain greater understanding about the students' experience of teaching and learning under the normal conditions of a regular school day. The inspector's feedback to the teacher and to the school

¹ Throughout this document, the word school refers to both schools and centres for education.

should enhance professional reflection and self-evaluation and consequently improve outcomes for students.

Incidental Inspection also provides benefits to the Inspectorate and to the wider education system. Incidental inspection will complement the existing range of inspection models available to the Inspectorate to carry out its quality assurance role. Information gathered in the course of an incidental inspection may inform inspection planning and can also help the Inspectorate to assess how well schools have improved since earlier inspections.

At the level of the education system, incidental inspection is also a source of important information about the quality of teaching and learning across all the schools visited and the lessons observed. This provides the system with a valuable snapshot of the students' experience which can inform ongoing improvement. Because it is an unannounced inspection, an incidental inspection can provide a more authentic quality assurance process than inspection models that provide schools with advance notification. Aggregated incidental inspection findings will identify strengths in the provision of education in the classrooms visited and will also point up where schools and teachers need to improve practice.

1.3 Incidental inspections as part of the Inspectorate's work

Inspectors carry out incidental (and other inspections) in fulfilment of their role under section 13 of the *Education Act 1998*. Section 13(3)(a)(i) of the Act provides for visits to recognised schools and centres for education "on the initiative of the Inspectorate" while section 13(7) places an obligation on the board and staff of a school to accord inspectors every reasonable facility and co-operation in the performance of their duties.

Incidental inspections are carried out in accordance with the terms of the *Professional Code of Practice on Evaluation and Reporting for the Inspectorate*.

2. What is the purpose of incidental inspection?

2.1 A focus on the classroom

A key focus of incidental inspection is the quality of the educational provision experienced by students in every-day school situations. The evaluation takes place against the background of the school's normal work, taking account of school context factors, including the school's own mission statement. The list below identifies the purposes which incidental inspection can serve:

- To monitor the quality and effectiveness of learning and teaching in schools
- To affirm good practice in classroom settings
- To support schools and teachers in developing self-reflective professional practice
- To provide advice to teachers and principals about the quality of the education provided in a school and how this can be improved
- To comment on the organisation and operation of schools.

The emphasis is on exploring students' experiences of teaching and learning in the individual classroom and the majority of incidental inspections include observation of a number of lessons by the inspector. An incidental inspection does not look at the broad range of a school's work and it is not determinative of the quality of educational provision at whole-school level.

The incidental inspection model is designed to be flexible so that it can provide information on a number of different aspects of the work of a school. In a very small number of cases, incidental inspections may also have any or all of the following purposes:

- To assess the implementation of guidelines, circular letters, regulations and other directions made by the Minister

- To collect information on factors that can be used to identify schools which would benefit from further inspection
- To monitor the progress made by a school in implementing the recommendations of earlier inspections
- To collect information on the operation and effectiveness of schools for research or other purposes (including the provision of information to other sections of the Department).

The inspector informs the principal about the purpose of his/her visit at the beginning of an incidental inspection.

2.2 Evaluating professional practice

While incidental inspections clearly involve an evaluation of the professional practice of teachers, and the quality of learning facilitated in the classroom, the inspection process is not a professional competence inspection. Procedures are in place under section 24 of the Education Act to facilitate schools in dealing with issues relating to professional competence and the inspection arrangements that are part of the Section 24 procedures are entirely separate from the incidental inspection model.

3. How are incidental inspections carried out?

The main purpose of incidental inspection is to observe, evaluate and support teaching and learning in classrooms and for that reason, incidental inspections will typically be conducted as described here. Where other aspects of a school's work are the focus of an incidental inspection, inspection activity is adapted as appropriate to ensure efficient gathering of information to support an accurate evaluation of the situation in the school.

Typically, schools are selected for incidental inspection as part of the process of inspection planning managed by the assistant chief inspector in each Inspectorate region. No advance notice is provided to schools that an incidental inspection is to be carried out.

Inspectors may conduct incidental inspections of lessons in a subject or programme area, or they may adopt a cross-curricular approach, evaluating learning and teaching across a range of subjects or programmes. Inspectors may also, for example, evaluate the quality of education provided to a class group or to individual students or groups of students for part of the school day. While the main focus of incidental inspections is generally on teaching and learning an inspector may review school documentation and records, gather information and consult with members of the school community.

3.1 What documentation will the inspector want to see?

In the majority of incidental inspections, the inspector's focus is on teaching and learning as it transacts in the individual classroom. Requests for documentation are kept to a minimum. While there is an expectation that teachers are able to present their written plans or schemes of work on a termly and yearly basis, inspectors base their evaluation of preparedness for teaching principally on the content, structure, pacing, methodology and assessment procedures of the lessons observed.

Where the focus of an incidental inspection is on other aspects of a school's work, specific documentation relating to that aspect may be requested. In these instances, relevant documentation which it is reasonable to expect a school to have available immediately, (for example, copies of school policies, attendance records, the school plan), will be requested.

3.2 What happens during a typical incidental inspection day?

An incidental inspection typically involves an initial meeting with the principal and/or deputy principal (or other teacher in charge) when the inspector or inspectors arrive in the school. In the majority of incidental inspections, the inspector visits classrooms or other settings to evaluate learning and teaching. Following the classroom observations, brief oral feedback is provided to the individual teachers. At the end of the day, the inspector provides oral feedback on the aspects of educational provision in the school which have been evaluated. The feedback is provided to the principal or to the deputy principal in the absence of the principal.

3.2.1 Initial meeting with the principal

- Generally, the inspector arrives at the school just before the beginning of the first lesson. On arrival at the school, the inspector introduces herself/himself to the principal and/or deputy principal (or other teacher in charge) and explains the nature and purpose of the visit
- The principal is asked to provide a copy of the school timetable for that day which the inspector uses to plan his or her lesson observation schedule. Lessons taught by short-term substitute teachers are not included on the schedule
- The inspector provides the principal with a draft schedule for classroom observations as early as possible following arrival in the school
- The inspector discusses with the principal any timetabling or calendar issues which may influence the lessons which are to be visited. Normally, inspectors do not request any changes or alterations to what is already planned in the school that day
- Typically, this initial short meeting is used by the inspector as an opportunity to highlight that the inspector is interested in finding out more about the normal work of the school and to avail of the opportunity to become familiar with the school context.

3.2.2 Lesson visits

- Inspectors evaluate learning and teaching in a number of lessons
- Visits to classrooms and other learning settings typically last the length of a lesson. In some instances a lesson may be of a double period duration and inspectors take this into account when planning the lesson observation schedule
- Visits to classrooms focus primarily on evaluating the quality of learning and teaching. Lessons vary in duration, nature and style. Consequently inspection methods also vary in order to obtain evidence upon which to base judgments about learning and teaching. During the lesson visit, the inspector's activities may include:
 - Brief introduction and discussion with the teacher
 - Appropriate introduction by the inspector of himself/herself to the class group
 - Observation of learning and teaching
 - Interaction with students
 - Review of students' work
 - Recording observations
 - Concluding discussion with the teacher
- In accordance with established practice, inspectors record the findings and recommendations arising from an incidental inspection
- At an agreed time the inspector provides brief oral feedback to the teacher. This may be immediately after the lesson or at another time during the school day. The purposes of this discussion are:
 - To discuss the lesson visited and any other issues related to the quality of learning and teaching observed
 - To identify, acknowledge and affirm good practice
 - To provide supportive and constructive feedback to the teacher
 - To make recommendations (where appropriate)

- The focus of advice and recommendations is on aspects for development that will improve the quality of the students' learning.

3.2.3 Feedback to the principal

Following lesson visits, the inspector has a short discussion with the principal or the deputy principal in the absence of the principal.

- The purpose of this discussion is:
 - To give brief oral feedback. The feedback will focus on the positive aspects of the work observed and, where appropriate, on aspects of learning and teaching that require improvement
 - To provide an opportunity for the principal to discuss matters relating to teaching and learning with the inspector
 - To provide feedback on the implementation of recommendations made in previous inspections
 - To provide advice and recommendations in respect of any priority whole-school issues identified during the incidental inspection that require further action by the school.
- The incidental inspection procedure is designed to allow inspectors to work in a supportive as well as evaluative capacity with schools. It is intended to facilitate teachers' professional reflection and to support school self-evaluation. The developmental feedback at the end of the incidental inspection is intended to support the valuable work of the school in its improvement agenda. It is expected that the principal will discuss the advice provided by the inspector with the board of management and with staff members with a view to improving practice in the school.
- Where requested, the inspector will facilitate further discussion of the key findings and recommendations with the principal and/or chairperson of the board of management.

3.3 Review of inspections

A teacher or a board of management affected by an inspection may seek a review of the inspection using the procedures outlined in *Procedures for Review of Inspections on Schools and Teachers under Section 13(9) of the Education Act (1998) (Revised 2006)*.

4. What is the Evaluation Framework for Incidental Inspection?

The evaluation framework used by inspectors in conducting incidental inspections in classrooms is set out in *Looking at Our School – An Aid to Self-Evaluation in Second-Level Schools*, Area 4, Quality of learning and teaching in subjects. Inspectors look at aspects of the teacher's practice such as preparedness for teaching, the management of students during the lesson, the teaching approaches used, how students were engaged in learning, and the way in which students' learning was monitored and assessed. The quality of students' learning in each lesson (including their skill development and understanding of concepts) is also assessed.

5. Publication and revision of this Guide

This Guide has been prepared following consultation with the education partners as required under Section 13(8) of the Education Act, 1998.

The Inspectorate is committed to improving the ways in which it carries out its evaluation and advisory work in schools and the provisions of this Guide will be reviewed initially in a formal consultation process with the education partners no later than one school year following first implementation. Subsequently, the provisions of the Guide will be reviewed from time to time.