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*The Education and Training  
Inspectorate*

Education and Training Inspectorate

*R*eport of a Survey of the

**Computerised Local Administration System  
for Schools (CLASS) Primary Project**

**Inspected: March-May 1999**

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 The purpose of the survey was to inspect and report on the training, support, dissemination and impact of the Computerised Local Administration System for Schools (CLASS) project on the administration and management in primary schools.
- 1.2 District Inspectors conducted the main survey through visits to a sample of 73 primary schools during the spring and summer terms of 1999. The sample was structured to ensure coverage of all aspects of implementation, including visits to the training provided by three of the CLASS support teams.

## 2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1 In 1989 the Department of Education and the Education and Library Boards established the CLASS Project to examine the business case for introducing automated computer systems to support administration in post-primary schools. In January 1991, the CLASS Project commenced the implementation of 16 School Information Management Systems (SIMS) modules into all secondary schools. In late 1992, following the preparation of a new business case it was agreed to provide similar systems in primary schools with enrolments of over 189 children (639 schools). In January 1994, it was agreed that all schools with enrolments of over 89 children would be provided with CLASS systems and the implementation began in the first of seven phases of primary schools. Implementation in the last phase began in June 1998. The CLASS system will be installed in the remaining small primary schools (with enrolments of less than 89 children) as part of the procurement of a managed service for information and communications technology (ICT), known as CLASSROOM 2000.
- 2.2 The structured modules of the CLASS system support a range of administrative tasks associated with pupil and teacher records, attendance, financial management and special needs. There are additional modules which retrieve data from across the system. CLASS, therefore, while regarded by teachers as predominantly an administration system, gives schools integrated management information which has the potential to support decision-making and school development planning.
- 2.3 CLASS is managed by a board comprising representatives of the Education and Library Boards (ELBs), the Department of Education Northern Ireland (DENI), the Governing Bodies Association, the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS), and a number of principals, including one primary school principal. There is a project director, and each member of the project staff is allocated to one of 6 teams: one central development team and five others, each with a responsibility for the implementation of CLASS in a particular Board area. The project team comprises staff with a range of experience and expertise in teaching (mostly within the post-primary phase), school and

local authority management, finance and programming. The project's total budget for the primary implementation for the period 1994 to 1999 was £13.6 million, 50% of which was spent on software and hardware, 40% on training and support services; the remaining 10% was delegated to schools to support the implementation and training programme.

### 3. SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS

- 3.1 The vast majority of schools found the training sessions provided by CLASS to be good or better; most rated the sessions as excellent.
- 3.2 In general, the training was co-ordinated appropriately with the installation of the systems; there were a few occasions, however, where the training was provided before the necessary software was in place in the school.
- 3.3 The schools reported their appreciation of the quality, detail, accessibility and helpfulness of the documentation.
- 3.4 In the majority of instances, the schools rated the quality of in-school, post-training support as very good or excellent.
- 3.5 The schools made frequent use of the central help-line service and the majority of the staff described it as assisting with problems in a prompt, helpful, professional and friendly manner. However, many schools reported an increase in the time taken by the help-line to respond, in late 1998 and early 1999.
- 3.6 In just under half the schools visited, steps were taken to train one or more additional members of staff in the use of CLASS. In the remaining schools, no wider dissemination had taken place, even in schools where CLASS has been installed for several years.
- 3.7 In a few schools, additional CLASS computers purchased by the school were not included in the initial upgrade programmes; this caused some temporary disruption to their use of the service.
- 3.8 The vast majority of schools recognised and reported useful or substantial benefits of the systems for school administration.
- 3.9 In a significant minority of schools, most of which joined the project during the early years of implementation, the use of CLASS was making a substantial contribution to school management. More widely, while many principals recognised the potential of CLASS to support school management, more needed to be done to promote its use for

that purpose through, for example, school management training initiatives and the dissemination of case-studies.

- 3.10 The introduction of CLASS technology to primary schools has led to a significant increase in the delegation of tasks from teachers to school secretaries, many of whom work part-time. The requirement for additional skills has been reflected in some recent advertisements for secretaries' posts in primary schools.
- 3.11 Schools reported as unhelpful the fact that some significant external educational organisations do not ensure that the format they use in seeking information is compatible with the use of the CLASS system.
- 3.12 In about 85% of the schools visited, the overall value of the system to the school was judged by the principal to be useful or better; 30% of principals judged the overall value to the school to be substantial.

#### **4. CLASS TRAINING COURSES**

- 4.1 Three one-day courses, provided by different ELB implementation teams, were inspected during the survey. The courses were planned carefully and presented well, with supporting documentation which was easy to read and understand. There was an appropriate balance between demonstration and practical activity at the keyboard. The presenters showed a clear knowledge of the context in which primary schools work. Only occasionally, was authentic data from the schools whose staff were attending the courses used for training purposes.
- 4.2 The vast majority of schools found the training sessions provided by the CLASS teams to be good or better; most rated the quality as excellent. Those attending the courses displayed a wide range of competence in ICT and the presenters were generally successful in adjusting the pace of training to match the different abilities. A few of those attending commented that the pace was either too intense or too slow. The schools' reported level of satisfaction with the training and support varied from ELB to ELB.
- 4.3 For the most part, the training was co-ordinated appropriately with the installation of the systems in respective schools. There were a few occasions, however, where the training was provided long before the necessary software was in place in schools.
- 4.4 In almost all cases, either the principal or the secretary, or both, attended the training courses. Several principals expressed the view that the initial course would have benefited from an overview of the potential of the system from a serving principal with experience

of using CLASS, and that there was insufficient emphasis on using the technology to support management.

- 4.5 There is evidence that the importance of CLASS for administration and management in schools needs to be more fully understood and addressed by other training providers, including, for example, those offering National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) courses for school secretaries and those involved in the training for Boards of Governors.
- 4.6 Problems relating to quality of access for disabled persons to the CLASS training centres in Belfast are outlined in an appendix to this report.

## 5. SUPPORT IN SCHOOLS

- 5.1 In the majority of cases, the schools rated the quality of support offered in schools as very good or excellent.
- 5.2 Schools reported their appreciation of the quality, detail, accessibility and helpfulness of the CLASS documentation. Guidance notes produced to support specific routines and training materials were used frequently, and the manuals were used for occasional reference.
- 5.3 CLASS provides a central help-line service to assist schools with any problems or queries which arise in the use of the system. Schools make frequent use of the help-line service and describe the service as assisting with problems in a prompt, helpful, professional and friendly manner. Schools reported a variety of instances to illustrate the ability of the project staff to address and respond to specific requests which involved tailoring the use of the systems to the specific needs of schools. This was reported to be especially useful in helping to meet the demands of administering and managing grant-maintained integrated primary schools.
- 5.4 From Autumn 1998 to April 1999, those using CLASS in primary schools reported that, while the quality of the service remained generally high, there was an increase in the time taken to respond, and a decrease in the level of support for problem-solving in individual schools.

*(During this period, the CLASS Project teams were given responsibility for installing and upgrading systems to provide connectivity to the Internet for all schools in order to meet targets for the government's policy on the National Grid for Learning (NGfL). This development resulted from DENI's Education Technology (ET) Strategy for Northern Ireland and included the installation of 1,300 new laptop computers and a training programme for school principals.)*

- 5.5 A few schools reported disruption where additional computers, bought by the school, were excluded from the initial CLASS upgrade programme and, consequently, could not be used for a period of time.
- 5.6 A significant minority of schools expressed concern that there was a lack of correspondence between the advice received from CLASS support teams and that received from ELB personnel, particularly in regard to purchasing computer hardware.

## 6. DISSEMINATION

- 6.1 In just under half the schools visited, steps were taken to train one or more additional members of staff in the use of CLASS. In the remaining schools, no further dissemination had taken place, even in schools where CLASS had been installed for several years. In several cases, the departure or retirement of the principal left the school without the necessary expertise to use the system. In only a few schools, did the principal recognise the need to provide internal training for a member of staff as a contribution to his or her career development.
- 6.2 In many schools, the small number of CLASS computers, and their location, typically, in the office of the principal and/or the secretary inhibited their more widespread use by teachers. The demand to use the machines for additional purposes, such as computer-based staff development, is increasing.

## 7. EFFECT ON ADMINISTRATION

- 7.1 The vast majority of schools recognised and reported useful or substantial benefits of the systems for school administration. In almost all cases, the schools were confident in the use of the systems and had moved their paper-based records directly to the computer.
- 7.2 There are many instances where the workload, productivity and degree of delegation of administrative tasks from teachers to secretaries had increased as a consequence both of the use of CLASS and of the introduction of LMS. ICT skills' requirements have been added to the job descriptions of advertisements for posts of some secretaries. Many principals commented on how much they depend on their school secretary and how disruptive a secretary's long-term absence would be for the school; particularly in the case of a teaching principal.
- 7.3 There is evidence that office routines in, for example, order processing and attendance recording, are handled in a more rigorous and systematic fashion in some schools as a consequence of the use of the CLASS system.

- 7.4 A few schools reported that the information required by the SENCO module is too complex. Special Education Needs Co-ordinators (SENCOs) are adapting to their new responsibilities and the procedures arising from the Code of Practice are still evolving in schools. These factors have contributed to the use of the SENCO module being at an early stage of implementation.
- 7.5 Many schools report as unhelpful the number of demands upon them for information from DENI, the Education and Library Boards and other organisations which take inadequate account of the availability of the CLASS system. More needs to be done to automate routines, such as those for purchasing, auditing, contracts and statistical returns.

## 8. EFFECT ON MANAGEMENT

- 8.1 In a significant minority of schools, most of which joined the project during the early years of implementation, there is evidence that the use of CLASS has made a substantial contribution to supporting school management. The benefit of the system to the management of the school is related to the extent to which the principal has an understanding of its potential. Teaching principals report that they are constrained by the demands of their duties in the classroom from developing a higher level of competence in their use of the system.
- 8.2 To date the implementation and training has focused on delivering the system's capabilities to generate, rather than the principal's ability to interpret, information. Those schools which make use of information from CLASS to support decision-making, recognise its considerable potential to support school management. More needs to be done to promote the use of CLASS for this purpose, through, for example school management training initiatives and the dissemination of case-studies.
- 8.3 A few schools suggested that CLASS should consider promoting the exchange and dissemination of examples of best management practice in the use of the technology through, for example, a user forum and case-studies.
- 8.4 In about 85% of the schools visited, the overall value of the system to the school was judged by the principal to be useful or better; of these about 30% judged the overall value to be substantial.



## 9. CONCLUSION

- 9.1 The evidence from the survey confirms that significant benefits and improvements have resulted for school administration arising from the installation and use of CLASS systems in primary schools. However, external organisations need to modify their information requirements in order to allow schools to make more efficient use of the systems.
- 9.2 CLASS training and support for schools is of a high quality, although the extent and promptness of support has been reduced in recent months by the considerable demands made on project staff by additional initiatives arising from the NGFL and the ET Strategy for Northern Ireland.
- 9.3 While many principals recognise the potential of CLASS to support school management, more needs to be done to promote its use for that purpose, through, for example school management training initiatives and the dissemination of case-studies.

## 10. PRIORITIES FOR ACTION

- 10.1 CLASS support teams should consider the facilitation of discussion between groups of users to enable principals and others to share experience, ideas and good management practice. Such groups should be encouraged to provide constructive feedback regarding how their needs, individually and collectively might be met more effectively by CLASS support. CLASS training should include inputs from principals who are known to be using the system to good effect.
- 10.2 There is a need for external organisations to streamline their information requests to schools; all who seek information from schools should ensure that information, where possible, is sought in a format which is compatible with CLASS outputs.
- 10.3 In the light of current and planned changes to the use of ICT to support school management and teaching and learning, schools need clearer advice on the way forward. In particular, there is a need for improved linkage between the work of the CLASS project and the work of ELB Curriculum Advisory Support Service staff to help ensure that the advice on ICT which schools receive from both sources is congruent and not contradictory. Specifically, the schools need clear and consistent advice relating to the purchase of hardware and where it should be located within their school to ensure appropriate access for present and future users.
- 10.4 The importance of CLASS for administration and management in schools needs to be understood more fully by training providers to ensure that all who are being trained to work in schools will have an appropriate understanding of the use and potential of the system. The introduction and promotion of training in the use of CLASS to support

school management will be important both in the context of the Professional Qualification for Headteachers (PQH) and the managed service, CLASSROOM 2000.

- 10.5 Schools depend on high quality support through the CLASS help-line. Many have commented on the noticeable decline in the quality of responsiveness and have attributed this to CLASS staff being over-stretched, due to their being assigned additional responsibilities. The smallest primary schools, with teaching principals will require a high level of good quality support to establish confidence and competence in the use of the system. It will be important that CLASS, and in due course, CLASSROOM 2000, develop and maintain staffing levels that are appropriate to ensure that its quality of support for schools can be maintained and developed.
- 10.6 Now that CLASS is firmly established in most primary schools and the modules relating to curricular areas are being implemented and used it is important that the potential of the use of the CLASS system for all members of staff is promoted and that all teaching staff should be made aware of their right to some level of access to the system.

## APPENDIX 1

### Health and Safety

1. The training centres for Belfast Education and Library Board (BELB) schools and South Eastern Education and Library Board (SEELB) schools are located in the same building; in both cases, access for disabled persons is poor. There is some considerable distance from the car-park to the entrance to the building; this access route includes exterior steps.

## APPENDIX 2

### Information Relating to Specific CLASS Modules

#### Descriptions of CLASS modules

##### STAR

The STAR module is the central module in the integrated CLASS system. Pupil data entered through the STAR module is shared by the other modules in the system. It handles a wide range of personal and academic information about pupils in a number of linked databases.

##### PERSONNEL

The Personnel module manages staff records, including personal, contractual and professional details eg in-service training; information stored here is used by other modules such as Finance.

##### ATTENDANCE

The Attendance module simplifies the important task of compiling children's attendance records as well as providing full analysis and reporting facilities.

##### REPORT GENERATOR (REPGEN)

The Repgen module can be tailored to produce a wide range of listings and reports. These can be simple or complex, in standard or user-defined formats. Repgen can draw data from the entire school system.

##### MIDAS

(Management Information and Data Access System)

The MIDAS module gives senior management immediate access to key management information held across the school system. The module facilitates both graphical and tabular displays and provides utilities such as conduct and event logs.

##### FMS

The FMS module is a purpose-built solution for managing a school's finances.

##### SENCO

The SENCO module assists in the management of all key areas of Special Needs provision and review. It enables the SEN co-ordinator to maintain a Special Needs Register, to record details of Education Plans, to monitor the children's achievements and progress and to plan forthcoming reviews including the generation of letters to relevant participants.

**APPENDIX 3**

**Schools Included in the CLASS Survey**

**BELB**

Holy Rosary PS  
 Rosetta PS  
 Belmont PS  
 St. John the Baptist Boys' PS  
 St Joseph's PS  
 Finaghy PS  
 St Catherine's PS  
 St Teresa's PS  
 Blackmountain PS  
 Seaview PS  
 St Therese of Lisieux PS  
 Currie PS  
 Bunscoil Phobal Feirste  
 Cranmore Integrated PS  
 Iveagh PS, Rathfriland

**SELB**

Armstrong PS  
 St Malachy's PS, Armagh  
 St Mary's PS, Ballygawley  
 St Joseph's PS, Dungannon  
 Birches PS, Portadown  
 Coagh PS  
 St Clare's Convent PS  
 St Patrick's PS, Mullaghbawn  
 Mountnorris PS  
 Carrick PS, Craigavon  
 St Patrick's PS Aghacommon  
 St Patrick's PS, Magheralin  
 Ballydown PS, Banbridge  
 Carrick PS, Warrenpoint  
 St John's PS, Coalisland

**NEELB**

St Patrick's and St Brigid's PS  
 Balnamore PS  
 Armoy PS  
 Broughshane PS  
 St Joseph's PS, Dunloy  
 St Mary's PS, Ballymena  
 Fourtowns PS  
 St Patrick's PS, Glen  
 Millquarter PS  
 Oakfield PS  
 Whiteabbey PS  
 Larne and Inver PS  
 St Brigid's PS, Ballymoney

**SEELB**

The Good Shepherd PS, Poleglass  
 St Joseph's PS, Lisburn  
 Knockmore PS, Lisburn  
 Dundonald PS  
 Hillsborough PS  
 Drumbo PS  
 Clandeboye PS  
 St Finian's PS, Newtownards  
 Millisle PS  
 Killinchy PS  
 Legamaddy PS  
 Dundrum PS  
 All Children Integrated PS, Newcastle  
 Gilnahirk PS

**WELB**

St Eugene's PS  
 Londonderry Model PS  
 St Columba's PS  
 Drumahoe PS  
 Artigarvan PS  
 St John's PS, Dungiven  
 Omagh County PS  
 Limavady Central PS

Kesh PS  
 St Caireall's PS, Castleterg  
 St Theresa's PS Strabane  
 Jones Memorial PS  
 St Patrick's PS, Derrygonnelly  
 St Patrick's PS, Carrickmore  
 All Saint's PS, Omagh  
 Oakgrove Integrated PS



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