



TransformED NI:

Transforming Teaching and Learning:
A Strategy for Educational Excellence in
Northern Ireland

March 2025







Contents

Ministerial Foreword	04
1. Our education system: opportunities and challenges	06
Introduction	06
The Independent Review of Education	07
Key priorities for reform	08
Wider context	09
Consultation and engagement	10
An evidence-informed system	10
2. The case for change	12
The importance of driving educational improvement	12
Educational standards in Northern Ireland	14
International performance	17
Overview – strengths and weaknesses	22
3. What makes high-performing systems different?	24
Making education a priority	25
Good teachers are the most important feature of a successful education system	26
Recruiting and retaining high-quality teachers	26
A strong culture of professional development will raise standards	29
Effective leaders are key to success	33
Design curriculum for coherence and mastery	35
Setting and defining high expectations for all and supporting children to take on challenges	42
Fit for purpose qualifications raise standards	46
Accountability and support	48
Greater equity must be a key aim of the education system	51
Moving forward	56
4. Delivering educational excellence	58
Ten Point Plan for educational excellence	58
Governance, monitoring and evaluation	61



Ministerial Foreword

An excellent education system is crucial to building a prosperous and sustainable future. It is the foundation of all economic, social and political development. It is how we educate well rounded citizens and create social cohesion. In this strategy for transforming teaching and learning, I set out an ambitious reform programme to deliver educational excellence in Northern Ireland.

My vision for education in 2032 is for a modern, forward-looking education system, scaffolded by a sustainable funding model, guided by robust evidence and evaluation and informed by learning from international best practice.

It is an education system which is truly life transforming, which breaks down barriers and narrows inequalities, allowing every young person to achieve their full potential and in which every child has the chance to make the most of their abilities and become the best version of themselves.

To achieve this new vision for educational excellence will require a partnership of many: school leaders, teachers, governors, parents, businesses and others. It will require us to lead change together. We need to renew and redouble our work across our education system, delivering evidence-informed policies supported by high-quality and cost-effective services.

Our journey will be informed by the recent Independent Review of Education which presents a roadmap for change across the next 20 years and beyond. While

such change can only be delivered over time, we must take the first steps now.

Alongside the critical work of Special Educational Needs (SEN) reform, my focus during the current mandate will be for a sustained evidence-based approach to improvement of the education system focused on the core areas of curriculum, assessment, qualifications, school improvement and tackling educational disadvantage. Reform in each of these areas will be underpinned by investment in high-quality teacher professional development.

Many of our schools have adopted a culture of reflection and continuous improvement. We need to do the same at system level ensuring education policy and support services are truly world leading. I wish to make best practice, common practice. That is why I have appointed an International Ministerial Advisory Panel made up of key individuals with renowned expertise to support the transformation of our education system.

This strategy represents a break with what has gone before. For too long, we have focused on structural issues in Northern Ireland whether that be academic selection or types of schools and simply relied on our highly qualified workforce to continue to produce excellent outcomes. This is neither sustainable nor effective. Now, we must focus on investing in and supporting high-quality professional development for our school leaders and teachers and relentlessly improving curriculum, pedagogy and assessment.

The world is indifferent to past reputations. Success will go to those education systems which are open to change and swift to adapt. I am approaching the task of reform with a sense of ambition and energy. I look forward to working together with all representatives, parties and stakeholders to transform and improve education delivery in Northern Ireland.

We have no choice but to be radical if our ambition is to be world-class. The most successful education systems combine a high-status teaching profession; an effective accountability system and a strong sense of aspiration for all children.

Our aim is to ensure our education system is truly world-leading – excellent, equitable, inclusive and able to meet the needs of all children and young people in an ever-changing world.

Paul Givan MLA
Minister of Education



1 Our education system: opportunities and challenges

Introduction

Historically, the Northern Ireland education system has had much to celebrate. Our young people perform comparably higher at both GCSE and A Level than their peers across the United Kingdom (UK) and we enjoy a highly qualified teaching workforce. There are many outstanding teachers and school leaders.

Yet our education system has been under considerable stress for a sustained period. There is a funding crisis as a result of systemic under-funding over many years. Investment in education has not kept pace with the ever-increasing demands on the system, which in turn has inhibited our ability to invest meaningfully in our workforce, our schools' estate and support services for our most vulnerable children and young people.

The resultant impact on the industrial relations environment has been corrosive, undermining the relationships of trust that are necessary for a thriving education system and causing stagnation at both system and school level in addressing stubborn educational challenges.

The legacy of the COVID-19 pandemic also endures, with changing attitudes to school and learning and a changing profile of need across our school population. The COVID-19 impact in schools presents government with a public policy problem unique in its depth, distribution and persistence.¹ All children were affected, some profoundly. Disadvantaged groups were disproportionately affected and different age groups were affected in different ways. It is likely that a COVID impact will be present in education for the next decade.

¹ [The-COVID-19-pandemic-may-be-a-thing-of-the-past.pdf](#)

The social challenges facing our children and young people, and in turn our teachers and schools in supporting them, are also more complex than ever. Increasingly, our children's readiness to learn is being eroded by a range of factors that lie outside the school gate and go beyond the responsibility of the education system.

As in other jurisdictions, Northern Ireland has seen a rise in the number of children and young people with SEN and the existing SEN system is no longer sustainable or capable of meeting their needs responsively and appropriately.

Our physical infrastructure across the schools' estate is ageing, dispersed and crumbling. The facilities in many of our schools are inadequate to support the effective delivery of the curriculum. The schools' estate requires urgent additional investment and modernisation. We also have many small schools which are no longer educationally or financially sustainable though rural school closures remain a controversial issue in public debate.

The Independent Review of Education

In a world that is changing fast and becoming more complex, we must ensure that these important issues are addressed and our education system is resourced, structured and equipped to answer the questions posed of it.

The [Independent Review of Education \(2023\)](#) is a thorough, evidence-based consideration of the fundamental issues impacting education in Northern Ireland.

The Review has made proposals for progressive reform of the education system over the next two decades. They have set out a vision for a well-designed, efficient, adequately funded system of education that continues to provide choice, is inclusive and encourages collaboration ahead of competition.

Realising the Review's ambition for education transformation will require significant and ongoing investment. It also needs agreement that education is a priority for our society today and for Northern Ireland's growth, prosperity and social cohesion in the longer-term. This means building a culture across our community where education is valued and recognised for the benefits it brings.

The Department has accepted almost all the Review's recommendations falling within its remit though in some areas the proposed approach to implementation may vary. There are a range of reforms and improvements to service delivery required and this is set out in more detail in the [response by the Department of Education to the Independent Review](#).

These reforms include but are not limited to:

- investment in high-quality early years and childcare provision;
- transformation of SEN support to cater equitably for the needs of all learners;
- raising the age of education participation so all learners should, by law, remain in education, apprenticeship or training until age 18;
- development of a long-term capital investment strategy;
- ensuring schools have access to high-quality, cost-effective support services;
- review and reconfiguration of education Arms-Length Bodies to deliver more effective services, particularly for the controlled sector; and
- greater investment in health and well-being interventions and pastoral care.

Key priorities for reform

Work will be progressed across all areas of the Independent Review's recommendations, however, in his statement to the Assembly in October 2024, the Education Minister set out his key priorities for reform during the current mandate. There is to be a renewed focus on the core areas of:

- curriculum;
- assessment;
- qualifications;
- tackling educational disadvantage; and
- school improvement.

Reform in each of these areas will be underpinned by greater investment in and a more coherent approach to Teacher Professional Learning.

These are key factors that shape high-performing education systems. Yet they have received limited focus or investment during the past decade. All need review, evaluation and improvement.

Educational research is clear that high-quality teaching and learning are at the heart of driving educational improvement. The McKinsey and Company, *Spark and Sustain Report* (February 2024) notes that, 'Based on clear evidence into what influences outcomes, successful school systems ground changes in the classroom, focusing first and foremost on teachers and the content they deliver'.²

Successful systems internationally focus on interventions closest to pupils and work outward, starting with the classroom – what is taught (curriculum), how it is taught (pedagogy) and how learning is evaluated (assessment and qualifications) – then the school (what supports exist for pupils and teachers) and finally aligning the system supports (infrastructure, funding etc) to what is needed in the classroom.

This strategy focuses on teaching and learning setting out in detail the Department's plans for a renewed focus on core classroom priorities in order to make Northern Ireland a truly world-leading education system. It provides a series of coherent, inter-related and evidence-based actions which will be delivered over the next number of years.

The evidence from high-performing systems demonstrates that having a coherently linked and complementary set of actions helps to ensure a greater degree of success in improving pupil outcomes.

Wider context

Many other wider areas of the Department's work will be complementary to this strategy. Top performing education systems consistently invest in quality early years education – getting children ready for formal learning through well-structured and purposeful play to build motivation, character and cognitive skills. This enables children to develop the core skills that will enable them to perform well throughout their educational careers.

Such high-quality early years education has significant potential to reduce disparities in educational outcomes. Additional investment in and expansion of early years provision is a key commitment of the Department and will complement the work of this strategy over the next number of years.

Similarly, as highlighted by the Independent Review of Education, there is a need for greater investment in health and well-being interventions and pastoral care. New approaches to supporting pupil well-being will be developed, piloted and evaluated during the current mandate.

² [Spark & Sustain: How all of the world's school systems can improve learning at scale | McKinsey](#)

It is also vital that the needs of pupils with SEN are carefully integrated into educational reform. Quality provision for children with SEN must be underpinned by up-to-date, evidence-informed practice and shaped by research on what works. This strategy will link closely with the recently published SEN Reform Agenda and five-year Delivery Plan, which sets out an ambitious programme for the reform of services to support children and young people with SEN.

Consultation and engagement

This strategy has been shaped by the extensive engagement with education stakeholders which informed the Independent Review of Education and other recent Departmental policies and programmes such as the *Framework to Transform 14-19 Education and Training Provision*. It has also been informed by feedback from the International Ministerial Advisory Panel and other key education stakeholders.

We will ensure that further engagement and consultation with stakeholders across the education system is integral to the development of the policies and programmes which will underpin implementation of this strategy.

Alongside school leaders, teachers, initial teacher education providers, academics and key education organisations; parents and pupils are key stakeholders. We recognise the importance of pupils' perspectives and will ensure their views on educational provision are surveyed, analysed and listened to throughout implementation of this strategy.

The role of parents in a child's education is invaluable and when parents are actively engaged the entire education system benefits. A key area of work underpinning all aspects of this strategy will be to support our schools in building parents' understanding of high-quality education and to improve communication on educational standards, curriculum goals and expectations for our pupils. This will help ensure parents are well informed and empowered to support their children's educational progress.

An evidence-informed system

In taking forward the educational reforms outlined in this strategy, it is vital for us to become an evidence-informed system using the best available research, data and evidence to shape the policies, practices and decisions that will govern our education system for the next decade.

In England, the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) has been central in shifting the system towards being genuinely evidence-based. The EEF is an

independent charity dedicated to breaking the link between family income and educational achievement. The EEF has demonstrated that it is feasible to rapidly expand the use of school-based randomised controlled trials in a country context, set high standards for research independence and generate new evidence on what works in education.

The Independent Review of Education described the need for a ‘central education intelligence and horizon scanning function’ to ensure the Department (and wider education system) had the technical capacity and appropriate access to research to make informed decisions.

An effective education research function is essential for improving learning outcomes and investing in such a function will enable Northern Ireland to develop more effective policies, better support teaching and learning and create a culture of continuous learning and improvement within the education system.

So we will:

- **Examine how best to establish a research function that will ensure a strong evidence-base for future education policy and practice in Northern Ireland.**





2 The case for change

The importance of driving educational improvement

Never has the quality of a country's education system been more important than it is today. Of course, for the individual, it has long been critical. Education develops our gifts, strengths and potential. It makes life more fulfilling, enables us to realise our goals and enhances self-reliance giving us greater control of our lives. Those who are better educated are deemed more employable, earn more, are healthier and live longer.

Current shifts in technology and the global economy, however, make the education of every child and young person more important than ever before. The new reality is that economic activity can be moved much more easily from one part of the world to another. Where businesses are looking for low-skilled workers, they will tend to find them wherever in the world they cost least; and in high productivity industries, businesses will be prepared to move in search of the high-level skills that they need.

A highly educated population is vital to Northern Ireland's prosperity. The decline of low-skilled work due to improvements in technology means it is both possible and highly desirable to educate almost everyone to higher levels than we have done historically. We cannot afford for anyone to be left behind.

As our economy develops and automation displaces a growing number of jobs and job roles, the demand for higher levels of skills and knowledge will continue to grow. As highlighted in the Skills Barometer there will be growth opportunities over the next 10 years across a range of sectors and occupations – with a focus predominantly on higher level skills and STEAM subjects.³

³ <https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/publications/skills-barometer-2023-2033> STEAM stands for Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Mathematics.

It is vital that we support as many young people as possible to reach the education and qualification levels that will offer viable and sustainable opportunities in our emerging labour market.

The growing economic power houses of the 21st century are those nations that have placed an absolute premium on getting their education system right. Northern Ireland must do the same.

Singapore scored significantly higher than all other countries in reading, mathematics and science in PISA 2022. It is recognised as one of the world's top performing education systems. This success is even more remarkable when it is considered that when Singapore gained independence in 1965, it was an impoverished country with few natural resources and a population with poor proficiency in literacy. There were few schools and colleges and the country had a low-skilled economy.

Within 50 years, Singapore had overtaken the major economies of Europe and North America as well as its high-performing East Asian rivals. Singapore's improvement was not an accident: it was a deliberate decision to use education as a foundation for building an advanced economy. Education was to be the engine of economic growth.

Underpinning these developments was a sustained belief in the importance of continually improving education. It was a systematic approach, maintained over decades and supported by public policy and spending.

There are important lessons here for Northern Ireland. Singapore shows clearly what can be achieved in a relatively short amount of time and how improvement can be driven quickly and systematically within an education system.

An important yet often underestimated barrier to achieving improvement is a lack of shared understanding about the problems the education system faces. When teachers or parents do not know what problems the government is trying to solve, it is hard to understand the policies that have been designed in response. Effective communication to build understanding of the aims and practices of high-quality education is essential.

In developing a reform strategy to deliver educational excellence in Northern Ireland, it is important that we recognise the context of where we are now, openly and transparently and learn in a sophisticated way from those countries which outperform us at present. This chapter analyses the current position of our education system in regard to both national and international educational standards.

To summarise, currently many other countries in the world are improving their school systems faster than Northern Ireland and have smaller gaps between the achievements of those who are experiencing socio-economic disadvantage and those who are not.

Educational standards in Northern Ireland

It is generally accepted worldwide that national level assessments play a critical role in demonstrating the efficacy of investment in education and in meeting public demands for educational accountability and improvement.

Northern Ireland is currently without any national measures of school or system performance at primary school or at Key Stage 3 due to widespread non-participation in the current arrangements for statutory end of Key Stage assessment over an extended period since 2013.

In 2013, around one fifth of pupils had not achieved the expected levels of literacy and numeracy at the end of primary school. Now we do not know the position. This is not acceptable and makes Northern Ireland an outlier internationally in being without basic performance data particularly at the key point of transition to post-primary school.

Positively, the educational standards achieved by school leavers have improved significantly over the last two decades with greater numbers and percentages of pupils achieving important qualifications and key benchmarks.

In 2023/4, 73% of Year 12 pupils attained the important benchmark of at least 5 grade A*-C passes at GCSE or equivalent level, including GCSE English and maths. In 2012/13, the comparative figure was 60.9%.

We have also successfully raised the bar for many children on Free School Meals with many more achieving real and important qualifications than 10 years ago. In 2023/24, 52.5% of Year 12 pupils entitled to Free School Meals achieved this key benchmark compared to 33.9% in 2012/13.

More pupils than ever are also staying on at school to complete sixth form study and outcomes have remained strong. In 2023/24, 71.4% of Year 14 pupils achieved 3 or more A Levels (including equivalents) at grades A*-C. In 2012/13, this figure was 65.2%.

The number of pupils leaving school with no formal qualifications has also reduced significantly from 27% in 1980, to 1.8% in 2013, to less than 1% in 2023.

Yet as in many systems internationally, there remains a strong correlation in

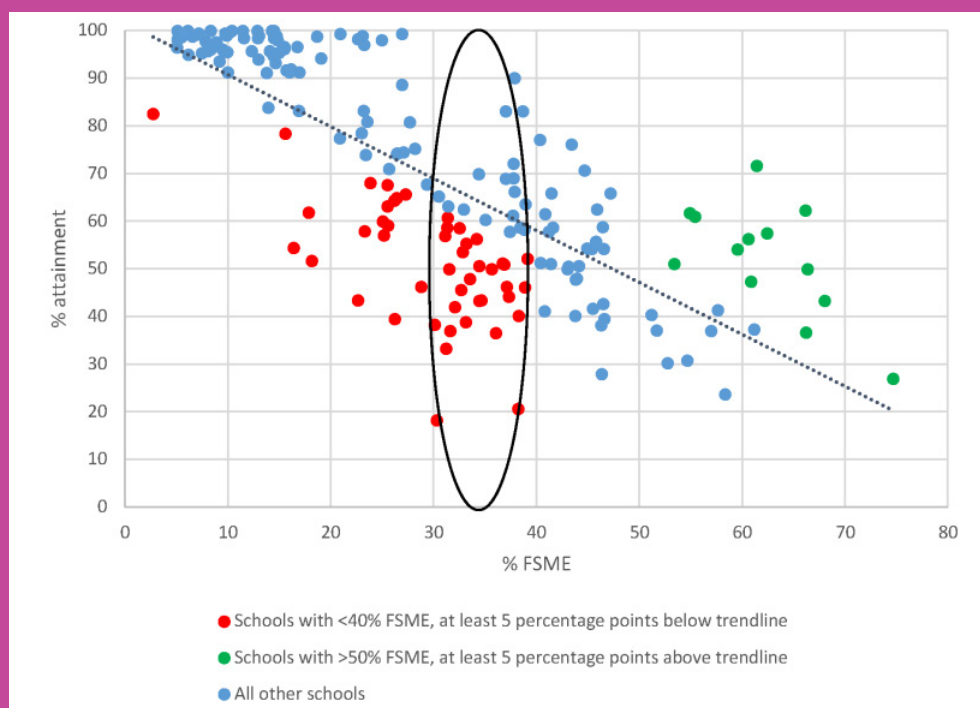
Northern Ireland between socio-economic disadvantage and educational outcomes. The graph below shows a general downward trend, that is, the higher the proportion of pupils entitled to Free School Meals in a school, the lower the attainment.

The gap in attainment between children on Free School Meals and those who are not has closed, but slowly. In 2023/24, the GCSE gap between pupils entitled to Free School Meals (52.5%) and non-Free School Meals pupils (80.0%) was 27.5% points. Ten years ago, the gap was 33.5% points.

The Independent Review of Education particularly highlighted that there are significant variations in pupil outcomes between schools that appear to share similar characteristics, including similar levels of disadvantage. They found that the highest concentration of pupil underperformance is found in schools in the 30% to 40% Free School Meal range.

The black oval in the centre point of the graph below highlights the very significant difference in attainment between schools with similar levels of disadvantage. The range of attainment (from the highest to lowest-performing school) at GCSE is 71.9 percentage points and at A Level is 69.3 percentage points.

Proportion of pupils achieving 5+ GCSEs (or equivalent) A*-C (including GCSE English and Maths) relative to proportion of Free School Meal Entitlement at school in 2018/19



A number of schools with relatively high levels of disadvantage perform above the average for such schools at both GCSE and A Level. Equally, there is also underperformance in a range of schools, across all sectors and across all types, with both high and low levels of disadvantage. These important issues need to be addressed and underperformance tackled across the entire system. Improvement of overall attainment and increased equity can and should go hand in hand.

This disparity in school outcomes is perhaps unsurprising when it is considered that school inspection, the main external framework for ensuring quality at the individual school level, has been fundamentally disrupted by Action Short of Strike by the main teaching unions over an extended period of some eight years.

Drilling beneath the headline figures, there are also wider questions around our measures of educational performance for school leavers.

High-quality vocational provision is vital, however, the Wolf report in England showed negative returns and poor progression attached to some vocational qualifications.⁴ It concluded that the staple offer for between a quarter and a third of the post-16 cohort was a diet of low-level vocational qualifications, most of which had little to no labour market value. It called for better communication, clarity and simplification.

Since the introduction of the Entitlement Framework, there has been increased uptake of non-GCSE and non-A Level qualifications in Northern Ireland. This has been in part to meet the requirement that at least one third of qualifications offered in a school must be applied qualifications.

There are now literally thousands of applied or vocational qualifications theoretically available in Northern Ireland. While some of the most popular and highly-used qualifications are known and understood, the language and terminology of vocational qualifications can be highly confusing. This adds to the problem of the lack of esteem for these qualifications. As in England, simplification and the use of familiar terminology is needed to help public understanding.

The school performance system, which was designed to allow outcomes data on qualifications of different size and grade structures to be captured and reported, has also had unintended impacts.

Some of the qualifications which have become very popular recently are not those which have the most support from employers and universities, but those which count for more than one GCSE in regard to performance points and can be less demanding for pupils than most GCSEs.

4 [DFE-00031-2011.pdf](#)

The current system may also lead parents and learners to assume that equivalence for system level performance points is the same as equivalence for progression to employment or other education settings and this is not always the case.

While good vocational qualifications are important and valuable, too many young people are following courses because they are easy to deliver or because they confer advantages in the accountability system rather than supporting learning, progression and employability.

There has also been a growth in pupils taking large-sized vocational qualifications in schools at post-16. These qualifications narrow the curriculum for the pupils taking them and limit flexibility if a pupil decides to change study pathways. The numbers taking them often exceed the number of opportunities available to learners when they complete these qualifications.

International performance

Over the past 25 years, a number of major studies have examined systematically how well pupils perform in literacy, mathematics and science in different countries of the world at different ages. These studies have begun to expose how well different education systems are doing.

At primary level, Northern Ireland participates in two large-scale international assessments. Year 6 pupils take part in the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study known as PIRLS and the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study known as TIMSS.

Recent results from these international studies show that primary school pupils here are performing well above the international average in both literacy and numeracy.

The PIRLS 2021 study of reading shows pupils in Northern Ireland significantly outperformed pupils in 52 of the 56 other participating countries and were significantly outperformed by pupils in only two countries, Singapore and the Republic of Ireland.⁵

In 2021, 23 percent of pupils in Northern Ireland reached the Advanced International Benchmark in reading, the third highest percentage internationally. This has increased over the last ten years.

There was, however, a relatively wide spread of reading attainment in Northern Ireland. Only two of the comparator countries, Australia and Singapore, had a

⁵ [PIRLS 2021 in Northern Ireland Full Report | Department of Education](#)

greater gap in mean scores between high and low attainers.

There is consistent evidence from large-scale international surveys that there is a strong relationship between pupils' home socio-economic status and their attainment, as well as a school's socio-economic profile and the performance of its pupils. In Northern Ireland, as on average internationally, pupils in the higher socio-economic status category had higher average attainment than those in the middle category who, in turn, had higher average attainment than those in the lower category. Pupils entitled to Free School Meals continued to score significantly lower than pupils who were not.

In most countries, girls significantly out-performed boys in reading. Notably, Northern Ireland had the highest gender gap among the comparator countries, with the gaps in England and the Republic of Ireland being the lowest. In Northern Ireland, a steady increase in girls' attainment has resulted in a widening of the gender gap over the past decade.

The overall pattern is similar in mathematics. In TIMSS 2019, Northern Ireland outperformed 51 of the 58 countries in mathematics and were significantly outperformed by only five countries.⁶ In terms of trends over time, Northern Ireland's performance in mathematics has remained stable. As in reading, this is a very strong performance.

Reflecting the high performance in mathematics overall, just over a quarter of our pupils reached the Advanced International Benchmark, the sixth highest percentage internationally.

As in reading, there was a relatively wide spread of attainment for mathematics in Northern Ireland. By contrast with reading, there were no significant differences in attainment between girls and boys in either mathematics or science.

Whilst international studies demonstrate Northern Ireland's extremely strong performance in literacy and numeracy at primary level, a recent study by Jennifer Buckingham has emphasised that this high performance may be attributed to transfer test preparation as much as the primary curriculum.⁷

The period of PIRLS and TIMSS assessment is usually at the end of Year 6 or beginning of Year 7. This is a period when there is widespread private teaching tuition and frequent transfer test practice testing both in and out of schools. By the time pupils in Northern Ireland undertake these assessments they may have had six months or more of extra instructional time on literacy and numeracy both in and out of school hours. It would be surprising if widespread one-to-one or

⁶ [TIMSS 2019 in Northern Ireland Full Report | Department of Education](#)

⁷ [projectReport-BUCKINGHAMJenniferChurchillFellowshipReport \(1\).pdf](#)

small group tuition by a qualified teacher – a proven and effective educational intervention – did not significantly improve children’s educational attainment.

It is also notable that Northern Ireland’s performance in TIMSS is less strong in science, which is not assessed in the transfer test. Performance was still above the international average but the average score for science in 2019 was lower than in mathematics and pupils in both England and the Republic of Ireland achieved scores that were on average significantly higher than in Northern Ireland. Only five per cent of pupils here reached the Advanced International Benchmark for science.

It is also concerning that Northern Ireland was unable to participate in TIMSS 2023 due to Action Short of Strike particularly when it is one of the few meaningful measures of our primary education system.

By contrast to the primary assessments, Northern Ireland’s performance in the Programme for International Assessment (PISA) – the third large scale international assessment which is undertaken at post primary level by 15 year olds – is much less impressive.

Northern Ireland’s outcomes in PISA 2022 are above average in reading but average in mathematics and science.⁸ Northern Ireland’s average scores for both mathematics and reading in 2022 had declined significantly since 2018. This pattern was mirrored across OECD countries following the COVID-19 pandemic. Notably, however, the COVID decline in Northern Ireland was overall larger than in England.

Notably our PISA results have declined in the longer-term. In 2000 and 2003, our 15 year olds were significantly above the OECD average in mathematics, reading and science. Over the last decade our scores have decreased significantly across all three domains as follows:

- the average score for reading in 2022 (485) was significantly below the score in 2012 (501), a difference of 16 points;
- the average mathematics score in 2022 (475) was significantly below the score in 2012 (487), a difference of 12 points; and
- the average science score in 2022 (488) was significantly below the score in 2012 (507), a difference of 19 points.

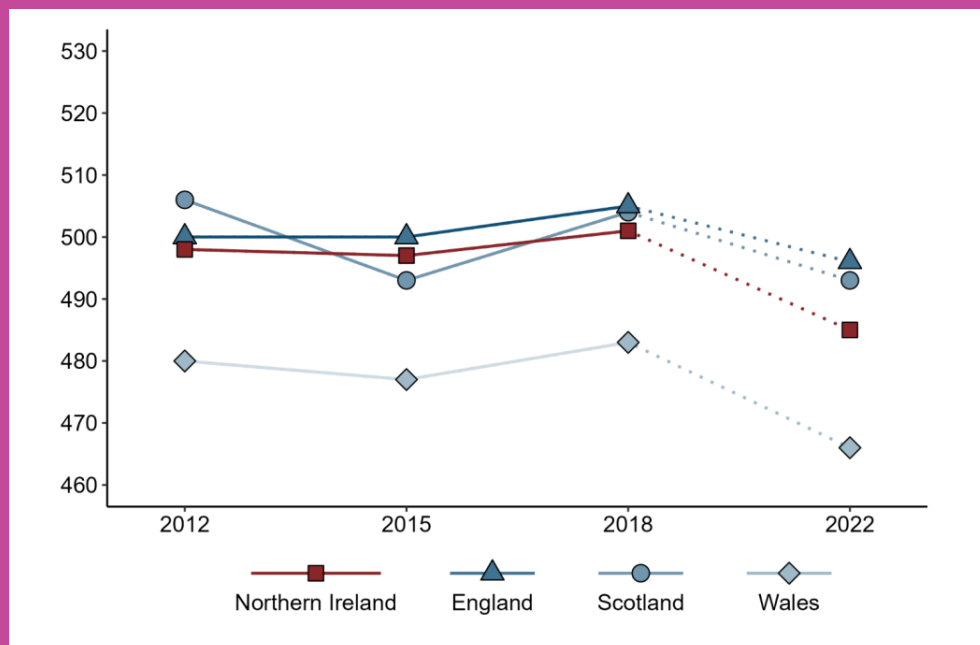
8 [PISA 2022 National Report for Northern Ireland | Department of Education](#)

As with previous PISA cycles, the highest performing education systems in 2022 tended to be in East Asia, with Singapore significantly outperforming all other education systems, particularly in mathematics and science. Japan, Taiwan, Macao and South Korea were also among the top performing systems for all three subject domains. Notably, in reading, the highest performing education system, Singapore, was followed by our neighbours, the Republic of Ireland, who performed at the same level as Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and Estonia.⁹

Of note is that Northern Ireland's average score in PISA 2022 was significantly higher than that of Wales, not significantly different to that of Scotland but significantly lower than the average score for both England and the Republic of Ireland in each of mathematics, reading and science.

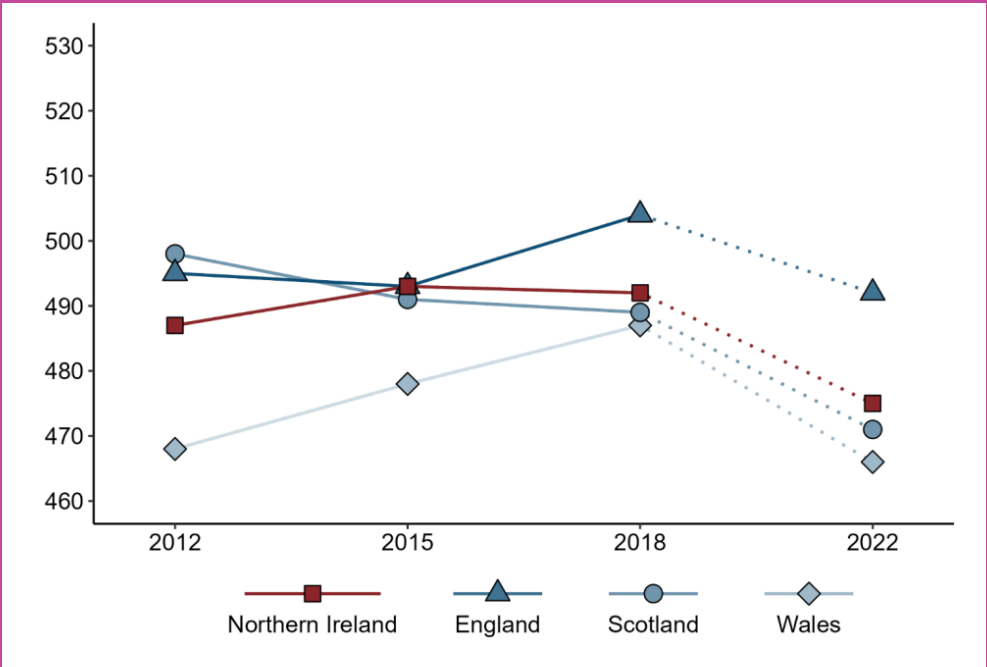
The graphs below of UK performance in PISA show clearly the decline in performance in Northern Ireland across all areas in 2022; the consistent decline in science performance over the last decade and the significant performance gap that now exists with England.

PISA Reading Score by UK Nation Over Time

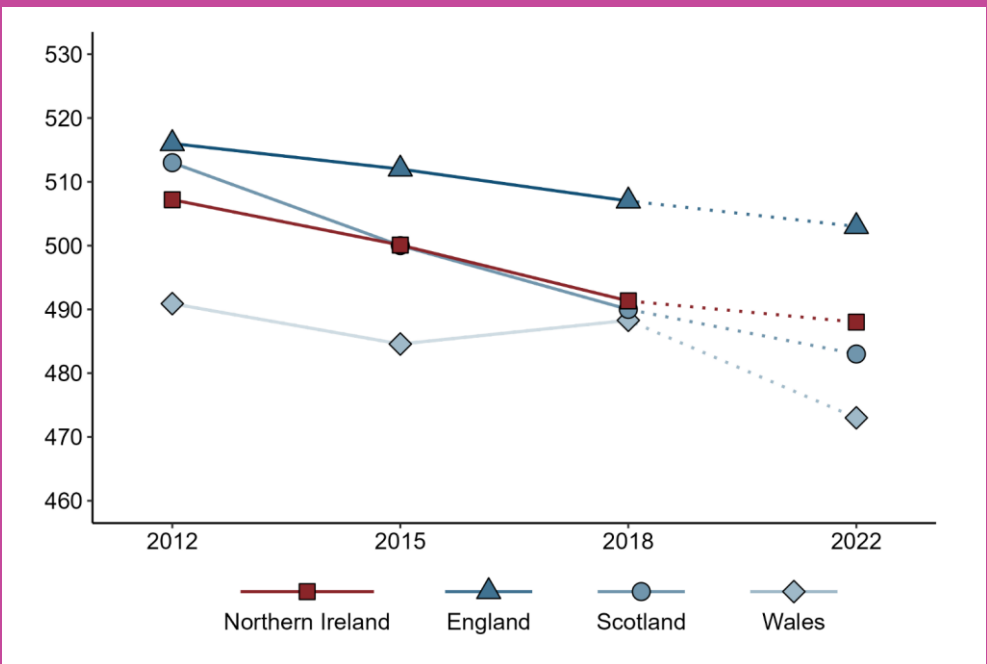


⁹ [PISA 2022 Results \(Volume I\) | OECD](#)

PISA Mathematics Score by UK Nation Over Time



PISA Science Scores by UK Nation Over Time



Our PISA performance in regard to socio-economic background is somewhat more positive. The relationship between attainment and socio-economic background can be measured using PISA's economic, social and cultural status (ESCS) index.

In Northern Ireland, there was a 36 score point difference in mathematics performance associated with a one-unit increase on the ESCS index. On average across the OECD countries, there was a 39 score point difference associated with a one-unit increase in ESCS. The score point difference in Northern Ireland was significantly smaller than the average difference across OECD countries. In reading, the difference was also significantly smaller than the average score point difference across OECD countries.

Overview – strengths and weaknesses

There are both strengths and weaknesses in educational standards in Northern Ireland. There are strengths in our national standards with improving outcomes for school leavers over time and notably for children entitled to Free School Meals. Nonetheless, there are concerning differences in performance at GCSE level between schools with similar levels of disadvantage and some schools continue to perform poorly.

Critically, there are key limitations to our data. It is not good enough that we do not know how our children are performing in literacy and numeracy at ages 8, 11 or 14.

Our performance in international assessments at primary level is very strong albeit there is a relatively wide spread of reading and mathematics attainment and the impact of the transfer test must be noted.

PISA outcomes tell an important story. Northern Ireland's performance could and should be better by the crucial stage at which young people are nearing completion of compulsory education. As a system, our performance has stagnated whilst that of England and the Republic of Ireland has improved relative to international comparators.

We must learn in a sophisticated way from those countries which outperform us at present. The UK and Ireland in the context of devolution provide a natural laboratory for examining the effects of divergent policies on educational outcomes. Such sophisticated approaches to policy learning will result in significant learning and improvement beyond mere policy borrowing.





3 What makes high-performing systems different?

High-performing education systems are those that achieve **excellence, equity and efficiency**: world-class levels of performance, for every pupil, at a sustainable cost.¹⁰

These three goals reinforce one another. To achieve excellent performance, it is necessary for all pupils to achieve equitably and for money to be spent well. Efficiency does not necessarily mean buying the cheapest goods or paying teachers less. It is about strategic investments over the course of a pupil's educational experience that reap long-term benefits.

There is no one standard design for a high-performing education system. All systems have their own unique contexts and challenges. One of the biggest mistakes that school systems can make is to try to 'lift and shift' best practices from a system that operates in a vastly different context.

There are, however, core elements of excellence identified by education research that are common across high-performing jurisdictions and which can inform the way forward in regard to teaching and learning in Northern Ireland.¹¹

This chapter summarises the core features of high-performing jurisdictions, draws out the current position in Northern Ireland and sets out the key actions we will take to deliver educational excellence.

¹⁰ [National Centre on Education and the Economy \(NCEE\), The Design of High-Performing Education Systems: A Framework for Policy and Practice](#)

¹¹ This strategy particularly draws on the work of the OECD in identifying the core features of high-performing education systems and the wider international context.

Making education a priority

Notably, high-performing systems make education a priority having convinced their citizens that it is worth investing in the future through education and to make choices that value education more than other things. In Singapore, for example, education represents 20% of government expenditure and is the biggest area of spend apart from defence.

As highlighted by the Independent Review of Education, education in Northern Ireland is significantly underfunded as a result of historical and systemic underinvestment. This funding crisis is directly affecting both learners and the workforce. It is evidenced by the numbers of schools in deficit and comparative analysis of funding in other jurisdictions.

The Review highlighted research by the Institute for Fiscal Studies which showed that per-pupil spend in Northern Ireland was the lowest of the four UK jurisdictions for most of the decade between 2012/13 and 2021/22. There is an annual £155 million funding gap with England and Wales based on funding per pupil and a further £136 million shortfall related to higher levels of learners with a statement of Special Educational Needs in Northern Ireland in comparison with England.

The level of education funding in Northern Ireland is a matter for the Executive collectively. The Department will continue to promote the value of investment in education at a societal level – as a protective factor in the lives of our young people and as a catalyst for improved economic, social and health outcomes. We will make the case consistently for increased investment in education to provide stability and to support our pupils, teaching workforce and estate infrastructure.

Funding levels are extremely important, however, we also know that education performance is uneven even at similar levels of spend. At lower levels of spending – up to about £6,400 per pupil – performance levels are highly correlated with the amount spent. Above that level, the correlation breaks down, with country performance largely independent of spend.

Internationally, at every spending level, there is significant variation in performance, with some systems achieving stronger outcomes than their spending would suggest and others lagging behind their peers at similar levels of spend.¹² We recognise, therefore, that we also need to look beyond ever-increasing expenditure to drive improvement in our education system.

12 Spark & Sustain How All the World's School Systems Can Improve Learning at Scale (February 2024)

Good teachers are the most important feature of a successful education system

All the evidence from different education systems around the world shows that the most important factor in determining how well children succeed is the quality of teachers and teaching. The quality of teaching is the single most important in-school factor in improving outcomes for pupils and it is particularly important for pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The best education systems in the world recruit top graduates as teachers and prepare them rigorously, focusing on effective classroom practice. They then ensure teachers receive ongoing professional development throughout their career.

We are determined to make teaching in Northern Ireland an attractive, high-status profession where every teacher receives world-class professional learning and development.

Recruiting and retaining high-quality teachers

McKinsey's famous maxim is that the quality of an education system can never exceed the quality of its teachers.¹³ Attracting, developing and retaining the best teachers is the greatest challenge that education systems face.

High-performing systems do whatever is possible to draw teachers from the highest performing segment of the population. The most successful countries, from the Far East to Scandinavia, are those where teaching has the highest status as a profession, which in turn has a profound impact on who aspires to enter the profession.

In the highest performing systems internationally, including Finland, Singapore, Hong Kong and South Korea, teachers are consistently drawn from the top third of graduates.

In Finland, more than a quarter of young people cite teaching as their top career choice. They have made teaching a sought-after career, with high social status and great demand for places in initial teacher education: only about one in ten applicants is accepted. Teaching is viewed not only a profession for graduates but for people with master's degrees, appealing to the brightest graduates. Teaching is seen as an important and well-respected profession and teachers are trusted and given great independence.

¹³ [How the world's best-performing school systems come out on top.pdf](#)

Many top-performing education systems have moved from recruiting teachers into a large number of specialised, low-status colleges of teacher education, with relatively low entrance standards, towards a relatively smaller number of university colleges with high entrance standards and high status in the university.

Northern Ireland is extremely fortunate that historically we have recruited high-performing school leavers and graduates to teaching. Teaching has been popular amongst our young people and the profession held in high esteem. We also have a long tradition of high-quality initial teacher education within the university colleges. This is a remarkable platform for our education system and one which mirrors the position in top performing jurisdictions internationally.

Yet in recent years there have been increasing challenges with teacher recruitment and retention, particularly at post-primary level. In July 2024, the Department's survey on teacher recruitment and retention highlighted that most post-primary schools have encountered difficulties in filling posts in some subjects.

Key challenges in recruiting and retaining teachers include more attractive alternatives or opportunities elsewhere, insufficient professional development opportunities as well as pay and stress.

Subject areas which have particular shortages are mathematics, science subjects (biology, chemistry, physics) and technology and design. This is particularly concerning as research strongly suggests that teacher subject knowledge, as well as overall attainment, is a key determinant of success, especially in the sciences and mathematics.

Moving forward, it is important that we put in place better strategic monitoring of teacher supply to anticipate and remediate problems, with improved data on teacher shortages, initial teacher education inflows, retention and teacher vacancy rates.

There is a need to incentivise and attract more top graduates into these key subject areas. We also need to communicate more effectively the societal value of teaching.

Many education systems internationally have increased the supply of teachers and attracted new groups to teaching through alternative pathways and models.¹⁴ These approaches not only open the profession to individuals who might not have previously considered teaching, but also typically offer fast tracked entry into the profession. Some initiatives have also specifically aimed to build a more diverse

¹⁴ [dd5140e4-en.pdf](#)

teaching workforce in order to better allocate teachers to areas of greatest need.

Such alternative pathways offer a potentially valuable mechanism for addressing teacher shortages in key subject areas in Northern Ireland.

Early career support

Student and early career teachers need high-quality support to build the foundation for a successful career.

There is a need in Northern Ireland to develop a core content framework that sets out a minimum entitlement during initial teacher education. This will ensure a consistent and unified approach that clearly identifies the essential skills and knowledge that all teachers should acquire before entering the classroom. To ensure an emphasis on subject-specific knowledge and understanding, the framework should be tailored to subject and phase.

England has introduced a two-year training and support programme for their early career teachers and we in Northern Ireland have our Induction and Early Professional Development programme which covers the first three years of graduate teachers' careers.¹⁵ Unlike other jurisdictions, teacher induction in Northern Ireland is not currently specified as a mandatory component of a teacher's professional learning journey.

Making induction mandatory will ensure all teachers receive essential support in the early years of teaching thereby improving retention, enhancing teaching quality and promoting a culture of professional development. There will be a clear entitlement for teachers to mentoring and support from expert colleagues at the start of their career.

There is also considerable research evidence on the very different experiences of early career teachers in different schools and it is also essential, therefore, to mandate what induction includes and to provide the resourcing to ensure that all teachers receive high-quality support.

¹⁵ This is set out in the recently revised [Teacher Education Partnership Handbook](#)

So we will:

- Put in place medium and long-term strategic monitoring of teacher supply to anticipate and remediate issues.
- Review how best to attract high-quality graduates to subject shortage areas.
- Develop a Core Content Framework for Initial Teacher Education which is subject and phase specific.
- Make induction a mandatory component of the professional learning journey of our teachers.
- Agree compulsory content and expand the directed learning element of the induction programme to ensure our early career teachers receive comprehensive and structured support.

A strong culture of professional development will raise standards

High-performing systems treat teachers as professionals, investing in high-quality professional learning that supports teachers' development throughout their career. They help teachers refine their practices and stay updated with the latest educational research whilst empowering them in the classroom.

Teachers' development is viewed in terms of career-long learning, beginning with initial teacher education, right through early and continuous professional learning, branching into specialisms and leadership, where appropriate.

The impact of professional learning is well documented in research literature. In England, a 2021 report from the Education Policy Institute found that giving teachers a formal entitlement to high-quality professional learning would cost less than 1% of the government's total budget for schools, bring significant returns in pupil attainment and may help to tackle teacher retention problems.¹⁶

High-quality professional learning for teachers has a significant effect on pupils' learning outcomes. Evidence suggests that quality professional learning has a greater effect on pupil attainment than other interventions schools may

¹⁶ [The cost of high-quality professional development for teachers in England - Education Policy Institute](#)

consider.¹⁷ This is neatly encapsulated in McKinsey's second maxim that the only way to improve outcomes is to improve instruction.

In recognition of this impact, a number of countries have introduced a formal entitlement to professional learning, for example, teachers in Singapore are entitled to 100 hours of professional development per year to stay up to date in their field and to improve their practice. In Shanghai, each teacher is expected to engage in 240 hours of professional development within five years.

A culture of classroom observation is a key part of creating effective and useful professional development. International evidence confirms that appraisal and feedback have a strong positive impact on teaching. The best performing systems in the world are characterised by high levels of lesson observation. For example, South Korea encourages teachers to open their classrooms once or twice a month as a matter of routine so that any other teacher can observe their lessons.

Japanese lesson study has been identified as a key contributor to Japan's successful performance in international assessments and has become increasingly popular as an approach to teacher professional development in the UK. However, the application of lesson study in other countries has been mixed – often lacking engagement with research knowledge, a focused research theme and input from an 'expert other' such as an academic outside the school, which are core features in Japan.¹⁸



17 [Evidence review: The effects of high-quality professional development on teachers and students - Education Policy Institute](#)

18 [Learning through research: The case for Japanese lesson study](#)

In addition to observation of teaching, a systematic research review found that there are some key features of professional development which are particularly linked to better achievement by children:

- feedback to teachers;
- the use of external expertise linked to school-based activities;
- scope for teachers to identify their own professional development focus;
- an emphasis on peer support and innovation;
- processes to encourage, extend and structure professional dialogue; and
- processes for sustaining professional development over time to enable teachers to embed practice in their classrooms.¹⁹

In top performing systems, there is also growing interest in ways to build cumulative knowledge across the profession, for example by strengthening connections between research and practice and encouraging schools to develop as learning organisations. There is a focus on developing a culture of self-evaluation and evidence-informed practice to embed critical thinking and evidence-based approaches to pedagogy. For example, recent research in the field of cognitive science can now really support effective practice, including for children with SEN.²⁰

In Northern Ireland, the Department's Strategy for Teacher Professional Learning – 'Learning Leaders' – which was launched in 2016 – sets out a vision that *Every teacher is a learning leader, accomplished in working collaboratively with all partners in the interests of children and young people.*²¹

Annually, the Education Authority (EA) supports Learning Leaders by providing a programme of regional and local professional learning opportunities. This is a continuum of ongoing development, combining early and continuous professional learning and leadership development.

Since 2016, leaders and teachers in Northern Ireland have also increasingly developed a variety of professional learning communities both formally, for example through Shared Education and school improvement networks, as well as through organic, locally driven school partnerships. There are growing informal

19 Cordingley, P., Bell, M., Rundell, B. and Evans, D. (2003). The impact of collaborative CPD on classroom teaching and learning. Research Evidence in Education Library, London: EPPI-Centre, Social Science Research Unit, Institute of Education, University of London.

20 [EEF Blog: Five evidence-based strategies to support... | EEF](#)

21 [Strategy document](#)

learning communities particularly through social media platforms. A significant number of schools have also engaged in action-based school research projects using evidence-informed practice and data informed decision-making processes to drive school improvement.²²

In support of Teacher Professional Learning, our schools receive ten development days (five Baker Days and five School Development Days) which can be used to undertake development on a whole-school, departmental or individual teacher basis, linked to school improvement. Each school decides how these days will be used, informed by the needs of the school, teachers and pupils.

However, Learning Leaders has suffered from a lack of funding to support implementation and there has not, to date, been a comprehensive approach to professional learning in Northern Ireland.

Investment has been extremely limited. There has not, for example, been earmarked funding to enable schools to purchase high-quality professional learning suited to their needs.

In recent years, there has also notably been a lack of subject-specific ongoing professional development to enhance subject-appropriate pedagogy. This has a key role in supporting effective teaching. Such professional learning helps to develop practice that will ensure that knowledge is taught **thoroughly** (so that all pupils make progress from old knowledge providing access to new knowledge), **rigorously** (with selection, shaping and resourcing that is responsive to relevant, up-to-date scholarship) and **meaningfully** (so that practice is joyful, engaging and mediated by teachers who have a relationship with *what* they teach).

Subject communities at post-primary level, which operate across the sector and transcend institutional or geographical boundaries of school, school cluster or area, are particularly important in generating and disseminating subject-specific professional practice.

If teachers feel that they are part of a dynamic, knowledge-creating community with a strong subject identity, taking collective responsibility for scrutinising and renewing their community's subject practice, it helps both sustain motivation and enhance practice.

Professional development should not be seen as an optional extra; rather it is a central prerequisite to being a professional and effective educator and it is vital that it is resourced and funded.

22 See for example, Paddy Shevlin and Martin Brown, *Sharing the Impact of Shaped Professional Learning Networks in Challenging Times* (February 2019) and *Towards Civic and Public Engagement The Continuing Journey and Impact of the DCU/EQI Shaped Professional Learning Research Network – Looking Back and Looking Forward* (May 2023)

So we will:

- Refresh the 2016 Learning Leaders Strategy to reflect current challenges and priorities.
- Develop a high-quality professional learning procurement framework for schools to supplement the core offer from EA.
- Provide additional funding for schools to purchase high-quality professional learning to meet their needs.
- Improve access to education research for teachers.
- Pilot investment in supporting groups of schools to create or further embed collaborative professional learning communities working with the research community.
- Pilot investment in the renewal and creation of subject professional learning communities to support subject-specific professional practice.
- Review Baker Days and School Development Days to ensure they are used effectively to support improvement and professional learning.

Effective leaders are key to success

School leadership is crucial to the success of high-performing education systems. Leadership is second only to classroom teaching as an influence on pupil learning. Schools are rarely more effective overall than their leaders. Poor leadership can undercut even the best teacher.

There is a clear link between effective leadership, which focuses relentlessly on improving the quality of teaching, leading to better learning and higher achievement for all learners. Increasing the capacity of leadership across all phases of education can lead to improving standards particularly in the contexts that need it most.

In top performing systems, promising candidates for leadership are proactively identified from the ranks of effective teachers. Through a career progression system, educators get progressively more demanding opportunities to practice mentorship and leadership and demonstrate these skills over several years.

In Northern Ireland, as in the rest of the UK, there are increasing concerns that leadership is not viewed as an attractive role and senior leadership roles are increasingly difficult to recruit into. There have been a reducing number of applicants for management roles in schools.

In the most effective systems, whether there are professional qualifications for headship or not, principals complete significant amounts of organised professional learning for school leadership. For example, two thirds of Singapore principals say that they had more than 400 hours of preparation for their role.

Providing the right opportunities for leadership development and the right programmes to develop future leaders is crucial to strengthening our education system.

Currently, EA delivers a Steps into Leadership and Senior Leadership Pathways programme for new and aspiring middle leaders, as well as courses for first time vice principals and principals.

In recent years, there has not been a qualification for headship to support our newly appointed and aspiring principals nor do we have a support programme for our existing, experienced principals. As far back as 2016, Learning Leaders identified the need to strengthen support and professional learning for school leaders by developing a pathway to leadership, underpinned by revised leadership competences.

Further, the most successful systems make use of or create networks of successful current and former school leaders to visit schools regularly and provide advice and support. For example, in England, the model of National Leaders of Education, where heads of outstanding schools provide support to other heads and schools, has proved effective in extending the impact of the best school leaders.

There is important evidence of the impact of leaders sharing practice. Notably, school-to-school support can help to close the gap for Free School Meals pupils alongside raising attainment overall.²³ The EA already identifies and matches experienced mentors to support newly appointed principals. This can be further extended to build capacity across the education system.

We also know that the quality of middle leadership is fundamental in achieving consistently high standards of teaching and learning. Investing in effective professional learning for middle leaders strengthens the entire education system by ensuring that leadership at all levels is well informed, confident and capable of driving positive change. Investing in middle leaders is crucial to the success of an education system.

²³ [System leadership: does school-to-school support close the gap?](#)

So we will:

- Develop a replacement qualification for headship to support our newly appointed and aspiring principals.
- Strengthen the provision of school-to-school support through a leaders of education programme.
- Develop a professional learning programme for existing, experienced principals.
- Review, strengthen and invest in professional learning for middle leaders.

Design curriculum for coherence and mastery

We need to ensure that the Northern Ireland curriculum remains aligned with international best practices, providing a knowledge-rich and well-structured approach. It is vital that pupils are supported to develop their learning in a well sequenced and explicit manner.

The Department has commissioned Lucy Crehan to conduct an independent review of the curriculum and to make a series of policy recommendations regarding the purpose, design, specification and implementation of the curriculum.

The Review will particularly examine how current curriculum design and implementation in Northern Ireland compares to international best practice and the coherence and progression of pupils' acquisition of knowledge, understanding and skills in every subject across each Key Stage and phase of education.

The best systems internationally design a coherent curriculum that identifies key knowledge and concepts for progression and ensure learners have really mastered the foundations by aiming for depth of learning as well as breadth. Their curricula set out clearly the core knowledge and understanding that all children should be expected to acquire during their schooling.

In systems such as Finland, Japan, Singapore and at the provincial level in systems such as Canada and China, there is a clearly defined sequence of knowledge and skills children ought to be taught at each year group.

As Tim Oates explains, 'in all high-performing systems, the fundamentals of subjects are strongly emphasised, have substantial time allocation, and are the focus of considerable attention in learning programmes.'²⁴

This focus on depth of learning is sometimes referred to as designing curricula for mastery. This model emphasises deep understanding and thorough and proficient knowledge and skills acquisition before moving onto the next area of knowledge, topic or concept, in contrast with traditional teaching methods in which pupils may be left behind, with gaps or misunderstanding widening. Pupils only move on when the expected level of understanding for the next stage of learning is secure.²⁵

At the end of the 1990s, Singapore for example, embedded this idea of deeper and more effective learning through the 'Teach Less, Learn More' campaign. The idea of mastery in education is rooted in the belief that almost all pupils can achieve high levels of understanding if given sufficient time and appropriate support.

The current Northern Ireland skilled-based curriculum was introduced in 2007. It was designed to reduce the prescription that had applied since 1989 and to give teachers much more flexibility to exercise their professional judgement in planning and delivering lessons. It also specifically aimed to promote a greater focus on skills and their application and on connecting learning across the curriculum.

There is, for all Key Stages, statutory minimum content which must be covered in schools. Beyond that, schools have significant freedom in what they cover and when it is covered. The reduction in prescription had clear benefits. Teachers know best how to teach, how to convey knowledge effectively and how to unlock understanding.

However, the Northern Ireland curriculum has been subject to minimal review during the past 17 years. Indeed, the Independent Review of Education highlighted the need for a continual programme of proactive review and refreshment of the curriculum, which has not been in place to date and recommended this should be the responsibility of a dedicated Curriculum Council for Northern Ireland. It also stressed the need to support teachers to deliver the curriculum by sustained investment in high-quality resources.

The Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) Curriculum Monitoring Report in 2019 found clear distinction between the national curriculum and the individual school curriculum. There was significant variation in understanding and implementation of the Northern Ireland curriculum within our schools.²⁶

24 <https://www.cambridgeassessment.org.uk/images/112281-could-do-better-using-international-comparisons-to-refine-the-national-curriculum-in-england.pdf>

25 See for evidence on the impact of mastery learning [Mastery learning | EEF](#)

26 [Curriculum Monitoring Programme | CCEA](#)

Areas of the current curriculum lack clarity on the core knowledge and skills to be developed. Critically, pupils' experiences of the curriculum may vary significantly from school to school depending on the leadership approach to curriculum planning and teacher confidence or familiarity with areas such as The World Around Us and digital skills.

The Curriculum Monitoring Report also highlighted concerns that the lack of prescription may lead to gaps in provision, as certain areas may not be addressed adequately unless they are statutorily prescribed. For example, primary respondents cited how science lacked sufficient attention within the broader context of The World Around Us as there was not a clear framework for progression.

Likewise, some respondents felt that the minimum content at Key Stage 3 did not provide an adequate grounding for further study at Key Stage 4. Stakeholders often reported an unstructured Key Stage 3 curriculum followed by content overload at Key Stage 4 with GCSEs operating as the real National Curriculum. There is a clear need for better learning progressions for pupils from 11-16.

Highly generic statements as seen in the current Northern Ireland curriculum, tend to create ambiguity in respect of curriculum entitlement – with the potential to both lower overall standards and open up differences in the quality of educational provision in different schools.

Conversely, the lack of specificity and agreement on the key concepts and knowledge within the curriculum can lead to curriculum overload. This is where new content items are added by schools in response to new societal demands without appropriate adjustment of other parts of the curriculum.

Schools are constantly under pressure to keep pace with changes in society. Interest groups, parents and politicians may put pressure on the curriculum to change in response to contemporary demands and topics. At the same time, the curriculum lacks the space to easily add new content without causing overcrowding. This results in pressure on teachers to move with undue pace through material and encourages a 'tick list' approach to teaching. This can result in what is sometimes described as a 'mile-wide-inch-deep' curriculum that does not allow pupils sufficient time to explore, understand and master the content.

OECD is clear pupils need to learn deeper and not more; their learning time should not be extended, nor should pupils learn at a surface level. Focus, rigour and coherence are key design principles when addressing curriculum overload.²⁷

²⁷ [OECD, Curriculum Overload \(November 2020\)](#). Focus suggests that a relatively small number of topics should be introduced to ensure deep, quality learning; rigour suggests that topics should be challenging and enable deep thinking and reflection, which is not to be confused with rigid or inflexible design; and coherence suggests that topics should be ordered in a logical way to create well sequenced progression.

International curriculum development

In considering the Northern Ireland curriculum, there is also a need to study wider international trends in curriculum development, as there has been considerable academic debate around curriculum design and implementation in recent years.

A growing number of jurisdictions including Sweden, Belgium, Norway, New Zealand and some Australian territories have reviewed the former skills-based approach to curriculum due to concerns relating to the lack of specificity, commonality and core knowledge.

In the UK, England has introduced a knowledge rich curriculum. Scotland has also recently convened a group to examine the position of knowledge in the Curriculum for Excellence. This follows significant concerns being raised in regard to the Curriculum for Excellence, with a major academic study by the University of Stirling suggesting that a significant issue lay in a gap between teacher practice and the aims and philosophy of the curriculum; progress in implementation was variable and that there were tensions between the big ideas of the curriculum and the finer detail of its experiences and outcomes.²⁸ There have been similar criticisms of the new curriculum for Wales.

Recent developments in regard to the science of learning have shown that teaching generic skills has little to no transfer value. It is increasingly recognised that knowledge is still extremely important and specific knowledge must be taught *before* specific skills can be developed. Working memory—where conscious processing of information takes place—is limited and can hold only a small amount of information at one time. Learning takes place when pupils can take in information, process it and store it in their long-term memory. Complex thinking results when pupils can retrieve concepts from their long-term memory in response to what they observe in their external environment.

Developing pupils' core knowledge allows them to better learn and retain information and build connections between ideas and what they are learning. This is the foundation of advanced learning.

Internationally, there is currently a revival of the importance of knowledge in education. As highlighted in a recent study, it has now re-emerged as a prerequisite for improved learning, critical thinking, problem-solving and reading comprehension, as a facilitator for collective discourse and as a catalyst for equitable opportunities for all.²⁹

All of the above has implications for the curriculum. Previously, the curriculum

²⁸ [Education and the Curriculum for Excellence | Research | University of Stirling](#)

²⁹ [978-3-031-74661-1 \(4\).pdf](#)

either tended to promote knowledge tick box behaviour, or, on the other extreme, tended to rely on almost knowledge-free competency-based concepts. The evolution in many countries is now towards a new knowledge-guided curriculum that values knowledge yet also attaches specific skills to particular knowledge domains.³⁰

This also has a disciplinary dimension. Disciplinary knowledge is the curricular term for what pupils learn about how knowledge was established, its degree of certainty and how it continues to be revised by scholars, artists or professional practice. As Christine Counsel has highlighted, for pupils to learn how knowledge is formed and changed distinguishes a knowledge-rich curriculum grounded in ‘powerful knowledge’ from one merely ossifying a canon.³¹

Resources

High-quality textbooks and resources are an integral part of establishing the policy intentions of a national curriculum. While precise approval mechanisms differ around the world, most high-performing jurisdictions locate textbooks as part of the set of ‘control factors’ determining the form and quality of arrangements.³²

In Singapore, textbooks are state-approved, and although a number of publishers co-exist in the system, all must meet state criteria. The textbooks encourage clarity regarding key concepts and core knowledge, provide clear learning progressions, include a wide range of examples and applications, support learner reflection and yet can be used in different ways by different teachers.

In Northern Ireland, there is a need to ensure access to high-quality textbooks, digital curriculum resources and video lessons that are effectively sequenced to help teachers deliver an evidence-based, high-quality curriculum. This will support improvements to curriculum quality across the system, reduce workload for teachers and ensure access to a range of high-quality lessons.

Literacy and numeracy

Literacy and numeracy are the essential foundation of all education. If pupils cannot read and write to a high level, then advanced academic skills such as digital literacy, are irrelevant – not because they are not important, but because pupils will not have the foundational skills necessary to learn and retain them.

It must continue to be a central purpose of our schools, supported by parents, to ensure that pupils develop the necessary literacy and numeracy skills to succeed at school and later, in life and at work.

30 [978-3-031-74661-1 \(3\).pdf](#)

31 https://my.chartered.college/impact_article/taking-curriculum-seriously/

32 [181744-why-textbooks-count-tim-oates.pdf](#)

It is essential that, after seven years of primary education, children have developed a firm foundation in these skills and that, after twelve years of compulsory education, young people leave school competent in reading, writing, talking and listening and in using mathematics.

In the context of a global decline in literacy, we have much work to do in this area. New data shows adult skills in literacy declining in most OECD countries. The second [OECD Survey](#) of Adult Skills, which measured the skills of around 160,000 16 to 65 year-olds across 31 countries, found declines have been even larger and more widespread among low-educated adults, with one in five adults now considered low performers in literacy, numeracy and problem solving.³³

Literacy is core to allowing pupils to access knowledge and all areas of learning within the curriculum. It is the key to unlocking the curriculum and a love for learning.

Equally, the acquisition of cultural knowledge across the curriculum is fundamental to supporting good literacy. Cognitive science and the psychology of background knowledge in reading, as popularised by E.D. Hirsch, shows that once the foundations of phonics are securely laid, we can only become literate through wide, secure connected knowledge. Vocabulary size is the outward expression of an inward acquisition of knowledge.

As Chris Such's work on reading has explained, we will not make children capable of accessing any text, unless they have broad cultural knowledge, systematically taught through humanities, science and the arts.³⁴ Research shows unequivocally that the steady building of broad, systematic knowledge can have a decisive impact on closing the disadvantage gap in reading.

The Department's former literacy and numeracy strategy, *Count, Read, Succeed*, dated from 2011, with much of the research underpinning it dating from even earlier. There is a critical need for revised literacy and numeracy strategies which take account of recent international research in these key areas and set out the support and resources that will be available to teachers.

Notably, the evidence for phonics is extremely strong and the theoretical assumptions and evidence for competing models of 'balanced reading' are weak. There is excellent evidence on approaches to reading acquisition and we need

33 [Why are adult literacy skills dropping? Insights from the OECD Survey of Adult Skills | OECD](#)

34 Such, C. (2021) *The Art and Science of Teaching Primary Reading*

to set out clear expectations for teaching reading in our schools.³⁵ It is vital that the teaching of phonics should be explicit and systematic across all schools to support children in learning to read.

So we will:

- Review and redesign the Northern Ireland curriculum to ensure every child enjoys an ambitious and knowledge rich curriculum that develops their learning in a well sequenced and explicit manner.
- Invest more in high-quality curriculum advice and resources to support teachers in the classroom.
- Ensure all children have secure mastery of foundations in both literacy and numeracy at primary school which will enhance later learning and support both equity and attainment.
- Develop new strategies for literacy and numeracy based on international best practice.



³⁵ See for example <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/education-evidence/teaching-learning-toolkit/phonics>
<https://www.sciencenews.org/article/balanced-literacy-phonics-teaching-reading-evidence>
<http://www.danielwillingham.com/daniel-willingham-science-and-education-blog/can-children-be-taught-to-comprehend-what-they-read>

Setting and defining high expectations for all and supporting children to take on challenges

At pupil level, in high-performing systems there is a consistent belief that all pupils can learn and achieve at a high level. In the East Asian countries that perform well in PISA and in other high-performing countries, including Canada, Estonia and Finland, parents, teachers and the public at large tend to share the belief that all pupils are capable of high achievement and to believe in effort rather than inherent talent as the route to success.

Shanghai's pupils, for example, believe that they are in control of their ability to achieve. They do not think that being good at mathematics is a natural gift; they have been taught that it depends on their own hard work and getting the right support from their teachers. Shanghai's system assumes that almost every pupil can succeed or at least can reach an adequate level of academic performance. Its PISA results show that very few pupils score poorly.

One of the most consequential findings from PISA is that, in most of the countries where pupils expect to have to work hard to achieve, virtually all pupils consistently meet high performance standards. Pupils in Singapore believe they will succeed if they try hard and they trust their teachers to help them succeed.

In Northern Ireland, as in other western European countries, there tends to be a belief that pupil achievement is mainly a product of inherited and fixed intelligence, not effort. This is critically important because research shows that the belief that we are responsible for the results of our behaviour influences motivation and that people are more likely to invest effort if they believe it will lead to the results they are trying to achieve.

In some countries, when pupils struggle, teachers respond by lowering standards. In doing so, they imply that low achievement is the consequence of a lack of inherent ability. Unlike effort, talent is seen as something that pupils have no control over, so pupils may be more likely to give up trying harder.

If a child falls behind and is not supported to progress through rapid, well targeted support it often leads to poor self-esteem and a sense of failure and difference. This in turn can contribute to behaviour issues, poor attendance and increased diagnosis of SEN.

Research suggests that intelligence develops over childhood in all but the most severe cases of intellectual disability and that speed and ease of development

depend partly on genetic factors and partly on environment with teaching quality, parental support and pupil effort making a key difference.

It is unlikely school systems will achieve performance parity with the best-performing countries until they accept that, with enough effort and support, almost all children can learn and achieve at high levels.

In high-performing systems, the belief in high-achievement is echoed in setting and defining high expectations and clearly defined learning outcomes for all children. Establishing high common standards can shape high-performing education systems by creating rigorous, focused and coherent content; reducing overlap in the curriculum across year groups; reducing variation in how curricula are delivered in different schools; and perhaps most importantly, reducing inequity between socio-economic groups.

In tandem with establishing high common standards, high-performing systems help children to take on challenges with strong support for all learners rather than providing simpler tasks. Efforts are made to close achievement gaps between different groups of pupils by providing additional resources and supports where needed.

Early identification of struggling learners and ongoing support to ensure they meet and exceed standards is key. This ensures young people acquire the essential knowledge to succeed in life and in the workforce.

In high-performing jurisdictions almost all pupils work towards the same curriculum, but the amount of support given is altered with the key intervention being small, flexible group support from qualified professionals. In-class differentiation in the form of more attention from the teacher or even support from more able peers is provided. Mainly though, the support offered is through additional one-to-one or small group attention with a teacher. In Finland and Canada, for example, there are additional qualified teachers who take pupils out of class for small amounts of time or help them at lunch or after school.

Northern Ireland does have agreed common standards for all pupils. Pupils at the end of each Key Stage aged 8, 11 and 14 must legally be assessed in the three cross-curricular skills of Communication, Using Mathematics and Using ICT, with reference to Levels of Progression. The Levels of Progression set out, in the form of 'can do' statements, a continuum of skills that a pupil should be able to demonstrate. Each level contains a series of separate competence-based statements.

The Department has agreed 'expected levels' which most children and young people are expected to be able to reach at these three key points in their education: age 8 (level 2); age 11 (level 4); and age 14 (level 5).

There is, however, limited confidence and buy-in to the current arrangements, which do not have wider public understanding or visibility. Their use has in part been undermined by the historic association with school accountability.

Further, practitioners have raised concerns regarding the Levels of Progression, including that they are too broad with too much ambiguity and subjectivity in the level descriptors.

Due to widespread non-participation from schools in the current arrangements for statutory end of Key Stage assessment over an extended period since 2013, Northern Ireland is currently without any national measures of school or system performance at primary school or at Key Stage 3. This is not acceptable and makes us an outlier internationally in being without basic performance data.

System-level sample assessments are large-scale evaluations of pupil performance conducted at the national level. These assessments are designed to measure the effectiveness of educational systems without evaluating individual pupils or schools directly. Instead, they gather data from a representative sample of pupils to draw conclusions about overall educational quality, performance trends and educational policies.

There is a clear and pressing need to establish as soon as possible how our system is performing in literacy and numeracy, particularly post COVID. It is proposed to introduce a system level check for pupils at the end of Key Stages 1-3. This will be designed and administered by CCEA.

Outcomes will not be used for individual school performance measurement nor published at school level. The data will be available to schools for their own benchmarking purposes if they wish to have it. We will also invite voluntary participation beyond the national sample should schools wish to opt in.

The key purpose will be to measure national educational performance. This approach will allow robust measurement of standards over time enabling a much more authoritative picture of our system's educational performance than is currently possible. The end of Key Stage sample tests will have higher levels of reliability, validity and comparability than any check based on teacher judgement of differing assessment tasks. It also minimises bureaucracy and workload for

schools. The tests will be very low stakes at school level meaning there will be no pressure on schools to engage in test preparation.

In the long term, we must establish high common attainment standards for pupils in Northern Ireland, with very clearly defined learning outcomes that we expect children to meet at key stages in their education. This will make it easier for teachers to assess progress and identify areas needing improvement. It will also allow parents to have a clearer understanding of learning expectations and better support their children's progress.

At pupil level, formative assessment for learning has been widely documented internationally to have a strong positive impact on teaching and learning. Formative assessments allow the educator to form a more detailed understanding of the pupil's abilities, which can be used to inform remediation, re-teaching and instructional strategy.

Most schools in Northern Ireland are very effective in the use of assessment data. Schools use internally generated assessment data to identify individual pupil, class and year group targets. Pupil level assessment is used both formatively to inform teaching and learning and summatively to evaluate whether pupils have reached individual targets at the end of the year.

Many schools use standardised tests to provide diagnostic assessment results annually. This baseline is used to track pupil progress and to inform learning strategies and curriculum decisions. Schools often map these outcomes against a measure of the child's ability to identify underachievement.

There are weaknesses, however, in the heavy reliance on commercial standardised tests. Schools administer and use the tests in different ways and at different times in the school year. Some schools routinely report the outcomes to parents, others do not. There are also significant costs to individual school budgets.

CCEA's Computer Adaptive Testing (CAT) pilot is an adaptive standardised test in literacy and numeracy which provides a standardised score, a numerical report and a skills report which identifies a list of competencies for the area of learning that have/ have not been achieved. This helps to identify pupils' areas of strength and improvement. The test is adaptive depending on the child's answers and levels of proficiency. This means it is accessible to all pupils including those with moderate learning difficulties.

To support improvement in formative assessment, we propose to invest in the

further development of CAT as a diagnostic/formative assessment tool at pupil level and to inform school self-evaluation. This will have potential savings for schools and benefits in ensuring consistent, well explained and timely reporting of pupil outcomes to parents as well as providing the ability to aggregate formative data to identify system wide strengths and weaknesses.

We will also provide updated support and guidance on formative assessment for schools.

So we will:

- Support schools to provide rapid, well targeted and evidence-based support when pupils fall behind.
- From the 2025/26 academic year, introduce a system-level sample check for literacy and numeracy and disseminate the assessment results to highlight strengths and challenges for the education system.
- Invest in upscaling and roll-out of CCEA's Computer Adaptive Testing for literacy and numeracy as a free alternative to commercial assessments to inform effective formative and diagnostic assessment in schools.
- Fundamentally review current arrangements for statutory assessment to develop a new system of attainment measures which set high standards and clearly defined learning outcomes for all pupils throughout both primary school and Key Stage 3.

Fit for purpose qualifications raise standards

Whilst no single approach to assessment at the end of secondary education is associated with the success of all high-performing jurisdictions, around two-thirds of such jurisdictions utilise external assessment at the end of basic secondary education.³⁶ Fit for purpose qualifications have a key role within the education system.

Equally, there is a need to ensure that qualifications are fit for the modern world, not only ensuring that content keeps pace with developments in the economy, technology and the world of work; but that the method of assessment also takes account of issues such as Artificial Intelligence and makes use of technological

³⁶ [610965-high-stakes-testing-after-basic-secondary-education-how-and-why-is-it-done-in-high-performing-education-systems-.pdf](#)

advances to update assessment methodology.

Internationally, many countries are reviewing their qualifications systems and are facing similar challenges: balancing skills development with the acquisition of core knowledge, academic pathways against more vocational options and considering the need to modernise and digitise exams and assessments.

Education research has in recent years highlighted serious issues with teaching to the test particularly in high stakes public examinations.³⁷ Exams are only ever a proxy for what we want to measure. A public examination is just a sample of the full curriculum.

At GCSE and A Level, in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, in humanities, literature and the arts, we see a proliferation of questions eliciting multiple short paragraphs of particular types, wherein teaching a 6-mark description answer or an 8-mark evaluation answer becomes the goal. Teachers are spending vast amounts of time teaching a language of 'mark schemes' rather than the subject.

Teaching which focusses on past papers and test preparation is not teaching the full curriculum. It is teaching to the sample. The improvements it generates are not likely to be genuine and it leads to a circle of substituting exam questions for curriculum.

School leaders and teachers have told us that the CCEA specifications for GCSE and A Level qualifications need updated. Ofqual recommends that detailed reviews of qualifications are conducted every three to five years. As CCEA's GCSE and A Level specifications were last reviewed in 2015/16, a review is now significantly overdue and provides an important opportunity to consider issues such as the structure, volume and type of assessment within these qualifications.

The school performance system, which was designed to allow outcomes data on qualifications of different size and grade structures to be captured and reported, has had unintended impacts. Some of the qualifications which have become very popular recently are not those which have the most support from employers and universities, but those which count for more than one GCSE in regard to performance points and can be less demanding than most GCSEs.

There is a pressing need to review the vast array of qualifications available to schools via the Northern Ireland Entitlement Framework Qualifications Accreditation Number (NIEFQAN) file. Many of these qualifications have never been individually quality assured by CCEA Regulation and some qualifications are over 15 years old.

37 See for example [Why teaching to the test is so bad - Daisy Christodoulou](#) and [Christine Counsell | the dignity of the thing](#)

This review will focus upon the economic relevance of all qualifications, the progression opportunities for learners to the next level of learning or training and the relevancy of each qualification's content to the Northern Ireland curriculum.

There is also a need to consider whether more fundamental reform of the qualifications system in Northern Ireland is required. The qualifications landscape across many education systems is witnessing a period of significant reform. In the long term, learners in Northern Ireland will continue to require qualifications, both general and vocational, that have currency locally, across other jurisdictions in the UK and further afield.

So we will:

- Take account of national and international research to consider the structure, volume and type of assessment at Key Stage 4 and post 16 and initiate a review of CCEA qualification specifications.
- Initiate a review of all qualifications approved for teaching in Northern Ireland schools and review the process for qualifications approval.
- Develop a managed exploration of assessment innovation particularly in regard to digital assessment.
- Initiate a wide-ranging civic conversation on more fundamental reform of qualifications to include consideration of the purpose, design and relevance of qualifications in a modern economy.

Accountability and support

Accountability is a central feature of high-performing education systems worldwide. It is essential for ensuring that educational goals are met, that resources are used efficiently and that pupils receive the best possible education. Assessment, evaluation and accountability allow educators and policy makers to keep their finger on the pulse of progress in education and are critical to driving educational improvement.

Successful systems internationally combine accountability with support rather than punitive sanctions to ensure high-quality, long-term school improvement. The very best systems use accountability for responsibility and answerability

rather than culpability and liability. They use data to identify areas for support and guidance, to refine policies, adjust practice and identify areas of improvement.

Effective accountability, designed well, fosters transparency and encourages continuous improvement creating a supportive and collaborative environment that encourages all stakeholders to take responsibility for outcomes.

In Northern Ireland, it is important to improve data on system performance to support an effective and evidence-based system, with professional collaboration and evidence-rich discussion and collaboration at its heart.

The central tenet of the Department's school improvement policy since 2009, *Every School a Good School*, is the belief that schools, themselves, through honest self-evaluation informed by data, are best placed to identify and address areas for improvement that can bring about better outcomes for pupils. Schools are asked to set their own realistic but challenging targets for improvement in their School Development Plans.

Historically, to assist schools in setting targets for inclusion in their School Development Plans, the Department provided benchmarking data in relation to Key Stage and GCSE attainment. This allows schools to compare their performance in assessments and in public examinations with schools in similar circumstances, in terms of enrolment bands and proportions of pupils entitled to Free School Meals. As noted above, many schools in Northern Ireland are very effective in the use of assessment data.

However, despite this culture of self-evaluation creating ownership of improvement, the prolonged period of Action Short of Strike has fundamentally undermined the functioning and coherence of effective systems of accountability.

We invest close to £3 billion in education annually and, as with any public investment, it is critical we have evidence to demonstrate expenditure is being used to best effect, is targeted appropriately and is achieving the desired impact. Yet we are without very basic information on pupil, school and system performance. Re-establishing a clear and robust accountability framework is central to ensuring an effective education system demonstrating value for money to government, taxpayer and parents.

We will, therefore, commission an independent review of accountability arrangements in Northern Ireland to inform the development of a coherent accountability framework.

Inspection is a critical part of the education accountability and improvement architecture in many countries internationally and historically in Northern Ireland. It is the key external mechanism for evaluating the quality of education at individual school level.

The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) has fundamentally reviewed its inspection process in recent years. The new inspection framework has been developed through co-design with practitioners and has a focus on supporting improvement.

Inspection is vital to all learners. Without inspection we have no external assurance that appropriate child protection arrangements are in place in schools or that basic statutory requirements around hours of instruction and delivering the curriculum are being met.

The most fundamental feature of an education system which promotes social mobility is one in which every child is able to attend a good school. Critically, the absence of inspection due to industrial action means that in recent years many schools have not been identified for the support they need to improve.

In the absence of inspection, we have no external assurance that our children and young people are receiving a satisfactory standard of teaching and learning. This impacts on all learners but inevitably impacts most on vulnerable and disadvantaged children. Equally, inspection is a key tool for identifying and disseminating best practice across the education system.

We cannot continue with the threat and reality of constant disruption. Disruption that is witnessed nowhere else in either the UK or Ireland. Northern Ireland is currently an outlier from all other local jurisdictions, all of whom set out clear legislative requirements to cooperate with inspection. New legislation to ensure that the statutory arrangements for inspection are robust and operate effectively is vital.

In tandem, inspection and school improvement policy must be aligned. It is vital to provide strong scaffolding and support to schools where it is needed.

To date, not enough attention has been paid to harnessing the expertise already in the system. As set out above, we need to develop networks that promote effective school-to-school support and local innovation, particularly through a leaders of education programme. This will help ensure school improvement support is available when and where it is needed.

There is also a need for a revised school improvement policy to provide a

continuum of support and identify clearly the different levels and types of support that will be available to schools in different circumstances. It is vital to prioritise early intervention, ensuring struggling schools and organisations receive targeted support before performance issues escalate.

So we will:

- Commission an independent review of accountability arrangements in Northern Ireland.
- Develop a coherent accountability framework to demonstrate value to government, taxpayers and parents and drive improvement through responsibility and answerability.
- Bring forward legislation to ensure that the statutory arrangements for inspection are robust and operate effectively in all circumstances.
- Develop a new school improvement policy to provide a framework to support schools in driving excellence and an improved model of external support when needed.

Greater equity must be a key aim of the education system

Excellence in education is simply not possible without greater equity. Without addressing inequities, education cannot reach its full potential for all pupils. Narrowing the gap for educationally disadvantaged groups underpins all aspects of this strategy. Schools can – and must – be engines of social mobility.

During the past decade, we have successfully raised the bar for many children on Free School Meals with more achieving real and important qualifications. Educational underachievement linked to economic disadvantage is, however, an issue that has persisted for many years despite numerous policy interventions and significant financial investment.

As in many systems internationally, there remains an extremely strong correlation between socio-economic disadvantage and educational outcomes in Northern Ireland. There are also significant disparities in outcomes between schools with pupils experiencing similar levels of disadvantage.

This does not have to be the case. In some countries such as Estonia, Canada, Hong Kong and Norway the impact of socio-economic status is much weaker than in most other countries, including Northern Ireland.

The most fundamental feature of an education system which promotes social mobility is one in which every child is able to attend a good school. There is a need to secure educational excellence everywhere – so that a pupil, in whatever circumstances, wherever they live, and in any school, receives the highest possible standard of education. This is a key focus of our commitments in regard to school improvement and inspection within this strategy.

High-quality teaching is the most important lever schools have to improve outcomes for their pupils. Yet it has long been recognised that schools serving disadvantaged communities are more likely to be staffed by teachers with fewer years of experience, lower qualifications and by non-specialist science and maths teachers.³⁸

Teachers overwhelmingly agree that teaching in schools serving more disadvantaged communities tends to involve harder work and requires more skills. Yet studies have shown that teachers in secondary schools serving disadvantaged communities are the most likely to say they will soon leave the profession.

Inequality in access to suitably qualified, high-quality teachers is likely to be an important contributor to the attainment gap that exists between pupils who come from disadvantaged families and those who do not. Our plans to address teacher shortages in key subjects, support high-quality teaching, improve curriculum resources and invest in professional learning are critical to raising attainment for disadvantaged pupils.

For children from relatively advantaged backgrounds, the curriculum they follow at school has always been less material – their parents will ensure they have the background knowledge and cultural literacy to read widely and pursue a wide range of interests.

Disadvantaged children are more likely to rely upon the school curriculum to provide the intellectual foundation they need to grow into confident, articulate young adults able to advance to an apprenticeship, university or a rewarding career.

As E.D. Hirsch has powerfully argued, and cognitive psychologists such as Daniel Willingham have proved, a ‘skills-based’ curriculum, light on knowledge provides scant support to disadvantaged children. The current review and future re-design

³⁸ See for example [The Recruitment Gap - The Sutton Trust](#), [Closing the Regional Attainment Gap - The Sutton Trust](#)

of the Northern Ireland curriculum are critical to supporting greater equity within the education system.

Currently in Northern Ireland, significant additional funding is allocated to schools to provide targeted support and opportunity to pupils from socially disadvantaged backgrounds. Approximately £75 million each year is provided directly to schools for Targeting Social Need through the Common Funding Formula and £8.1 million through the Extended Schools programme to support children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

A key challenge is linking this spending with improved learning outcomes. Evidence indicates that giving schools the autonomy to lead on appropriate interventions and provide tailored local solutions to individual problems is the most effective way of improving teaching and learning for children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

However, schools must also be supported to make informed choices using for example tools such as the EEF Teaching and Learning Toolkit which provides an accessible summary of the international evidence on approaches and interventions.³⁹

As highlighted earlier, schools with similar levels of disadvantage currently have very different performance levels at GCSE which indicates the need to review how this delegated funding is being allocated and utilised. It is important that it is being used in an evidence-informed and well targeted manner for maximum impact.

We also recognise that children and young people's learning experiences cannot be divorced from other aspects of their development and what happens to them in their families and communities. Indeed, this was never more evident than during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the last number of decades, many countries have put in place a range of 'beyond school' interventions to integrate different services, align them with the work of schools and to help schools reach into their communities. Such wider strategies often focus on the most significant non-academic barriers to success in school, including attendance, behaviour and social and emotional support.

In Northern Ireland, the Extended Schools Programme has been in place since 2006 and is aimed at enabling schools to work closely with members of the wider community through initiatives such as breakfast or homework clubs, sport, art, drama and programmes for parents and families.

³⁹ <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/evidence-summaries/teaching-learning-toolkit/>

'A Fair Start' recommended that there should be a focus on communities and families in the most disadvantaged areas to ensure children and young people are supported in all contexts in which their lives are lived.

The new RAISE programme aims to reduce educational disadvantage and will provide investment of around £20 million over the next two years, with the potential for further funding. The programme offers an important opportunity to look afresh at the issues caused by deprivation and to drive forward a whole community, place-based approach to remove the barriers to learning and educational achievement that many of our children and young people are facing.

It will aim to apply a child centred, community informed and inclusion focused lens to the design and delivery of educational initiatives in localities. There will be a bespoke local Strategic Plan for each locality, codesigned by schools and other settings, families and communities.

The RAISE programme will take a structured approach to assessing the impact of interventions on educational attainment and reducing disadvantage. We will monitor and evaluate the approaches taken to inform longer-term policy development regarding educational disadvantage.

The RAISE Programme also provides an important opportunity to support parental agency to engage with their children's education and make more informed decisions and actions.

The 'London Effect' or 'London Advantage' refers to the higher attainment and progress of pupils in London compared to the rest of England in recent times. It is an effect which is most apparent amongst pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds notably those entitled to Free School Meals.

Studies have found that the most important drivers of the London Effect were parental expectations about the young person going to university (accounting for 27.1% of the overall London Effect), hours spent on homework (18% of the total effect), academic self-belief (17.5%) and personal aspirations for Year 12 (7.8%).⁴⁰

It is clear from such evidence that empowering parents to take an active role in their children's education helps break the cycle of poverty and underachievement. When parents in more economically disadvantaged areas have improved knowledge, skills and confidence to advocate for their children's academic success, it can have far-reaching impact.

⁴⁰ [Examining the London advantage in attainment: evidence from LSYPE](#)

Raising the age of compulsory education

Most of our young people currently remain in education and training until age 18 but some, particularly our most vulnerable, do not. Participation in education beyond the age of 16 directly impacts upon the life chances of young people. Regrettably, a young person's background remains a key factor in whether they progress to post-16 education.

Compulsory education or training ending at 16 is a remnant of a manufacturing society, with many unskilled jobs that no longer exist. Jobs today require higher levels of skill and education.

Currently, as post-16 education is not compulsory, individual young people have a significant degree of autonomy in decision making, particularly those who are leaving school and may be amongst the lowest achievers and most vulnerable. This can lead to poor choices.

Extending compulsory education and training to age 18 will help ensure that all young people have access to the same educational opportunities. It will create a minimum offer for all young people, particularly our most vulnerable, ensuring they have equity of opportunity and a structured pathway of support and guidance.

So we will:

- Introduce legislation to ensure all learners remain in education, apprenticeship or training until age 18.
- Carry out a comprehensive review of all funding targeted at tackling educational disadvantage to ensure it is evidence-informed and well targeted.
- Roll out the RAISE Programme in localities across Northern Ireland to invest in, monitor and evaluate whole community and place-based approaches to raise achievement and reduce educational disadvantage.

Moving forward

While each high-performing education system has their own unique and individual approach to aspects of education, successful systems all share certain common features. Many have put in place comprehensive plans for improvement which involve improving teaching quality, modernising curricula, making schools more accountable to their communities, harnessing detailed performance data and encouraging professional collaboration.

High-performing countries make a consistent effort to look outward and incorporate the results of that learning into policy and practice. It is vital to look seriously and dispassionately at good practice here and elsewhere to become knowledgeable of what works in which contexts and to apply it consciously.

Northern Ireland has several of the characteristics of top performing jurisdictions. We attract and retain a teaching workforce drawn from top graduates and our practitioners have developed a range of professional learning communities.

However, we have not invested sufficiently in professional development for many years. This is vital to supporting our teachers to continuously improve the quality of teaching in our classrooms.

Our curriculum has not identified and sequenced coherently the core knowledge and concepts that are vital for all children to learn, nor have we agreed attainment standards that are implemented and understood across our system.

At a subject level, there is a need to ensure that high-quality and coherent curriculum content, resources, qualifications and associated Teacher Professional Learning are all in place.

Our systems of accountability and school improvement, including school and teacher evaluation and pupil assessment, have been fundamentally undermined and need to be reviewed and refreshed.

This strategy outlines the steps necessary to enact systematic reform in Northern Ireland in the core areas of teaching and leadership, curriculum, assessment, qualifications, school improvement and accountability which will allow us to learn from, and outpace, the world's best.





4 Delivering educational excellence

Ten Point Plan for educational excellence

An effective education system is marked by coherence, in which all aspects of the system are well aligned with each other. This means not only within and across subjects in the form of clear learning progressions, but also wider coherence and alignment in curriculum, assessment, qualifications, accountability and professional development.

The very best performing education systems show us that we must pay attention to all these things at once if our school system is to become one of the world's fastest improving. The best school systems in the world are also constantly striving to get better.

This strategy aims to reframe the discussion about education in Northern Ireland and to begin an open and honest conversation about our education system within the wider international context.

The key elements of the strategy have been summarised as a ten point plan for educational excellence, which aims to bring a new drive and coherence to the improvement of our system.

Each of these ten strategic commitments aims to learn systematically from the most effective and fastest improving school systems in the world and to tackle the weaknesses currently identified within our system. Through taking these steps, we believe that we will create a system in which our schools are better able to raise standards and narrow the gap in attainment.

Ten Point Plan for educational excellence in Northern Ireland		
1	A KNOWLEDGE-RICH CURRICULUM	We will review and redesign the Northern Ireland curriculum to ensure every child enjoys an ambitious and knowledge rich curriculum that develops their learning in a well sequenced and explicit manner.
2	HIGH-QUALITY CURRICULUM ADVICE AND RESOURCES	We will provide greater investment in high-quality curriculum advice and resources to support teachers in the classroom.
3	PRIORITISING TEACHER PROFESSIONAL LEARNING	We will ensure there is sustained investment to provide a coherent approach to Teacher Professional Learning that supports teachers throughout their career.
4	EVIDENCE INFORMED APPROACHES TO LITERACY AND NUMERACY	We will introduce new literacy and numeracy strategies informed by evidence and based on international best practice.
5	HIGH STANDARDS AND SYSTEM LEVEL DATA	We will introduce a new system of attainment measures for end of Key Stage assessment to set high standards for all children and provide reliable system level performance measures.

Ten Point Plan for educational excellence in Northern Ireland		
6	PORTABLE, PROGRESSIVE AND FIT FOR PURPOSE QUALIFICATIONS	We will review the qualifications landscape to ensure availability of high-quality qualifications that are up to date, portable and fit for purpose to support progression to a higher level of learning, training, or into employment.
7	A FOCUS ON CONTINUAL EDUCATIONAL IMPROVEMENT	We will introduce a new school improvement policy to provide a framework to support excellence and an improved model of external support for schools.
8	AN INTEGRATED APPROACH TO TACKLE EDUCATIONAL DISADVANTAGE	We will deliver an integrated approach to tackling educational disadvantage providing a continuum of evidence-based interventions within schools, families and communities.
9	ALL LEARNERS ENGAGED IN EDUCATION TO 18	We will introduce legislation to ensure all learners remain in education, apprenticeship or training until age 18.
10	EFFECTIVE ACCOUNTABILITY DRIVING IMPROVEMENT	We will introduce a coherent accountability framework to demonstrate value to government, taxpayers and parents and drive improvement through responsibility and answerability.

Governance, monitoring and evaluation

A detailed implementation plan to support this strategy will be published in spring 2025 identifying lead organisations and delivery mechanisms, as well as funding requirements.

Appropriate governance structures will be established to ensure that there is a clear focus on delivery. This will be led by a Senior Officer within the Department of Education and report directly to the Minister. Delivery partners including EA, CCEA, Higher Education Institutions and other sectoral support bodies will be represented as appropriate. The recently established International Ministerial Advisory Panel will also provide advice, guidance and support on implementation.

Embedding a culture of monitoring, evaluation and quality assurance will be woven through all aspects of implementation. Following publication of the implementation plan, the Department will report at key milestones notably through an Annual Progress Report.

Integral to success will be consistent improvement in pupil attainment and we will consider further appropriate system measures and targets, as we take forward work on curriculum and qualifications review, Key Stage assessment and literacy and numeracy.

So we will:

- Publish a detailed implementation plan in spring 2025.



Department of
Education
www.education-ni.gov.uk

TransformED NI:

Transforming Teaching and Learning:
A Strategy for Educational Excellence in
Northern Ireland

March 2025