Chief Inspector's
Report

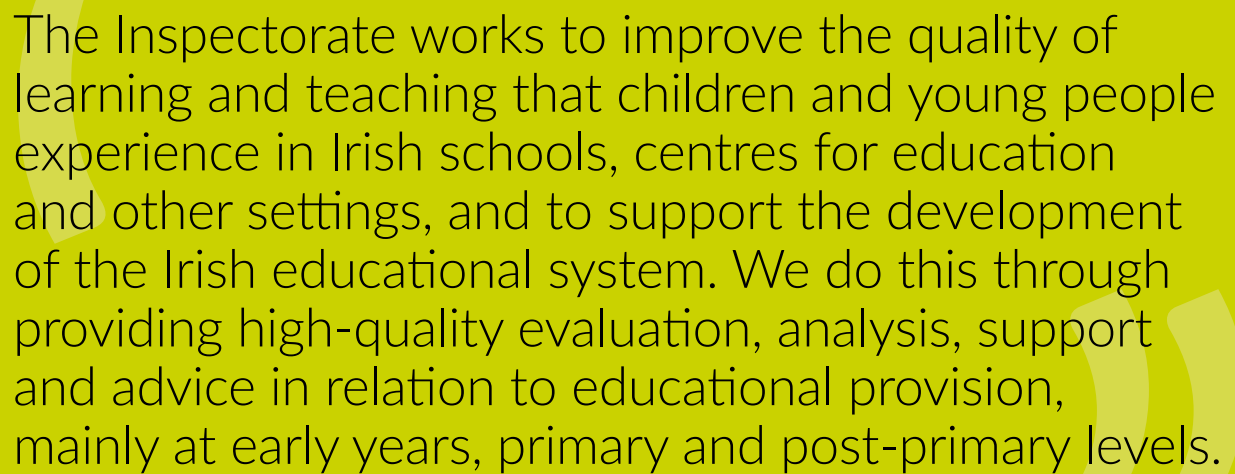September 2016-December 2020

Excellence in Learning for all

An Roinn Oideachais
Department of Education

An Chigireacht
Inspectorate

"The Inspectorate works to improve the quality of learning and teaching that children and young people experience in Irish schools, centres for education and other settings, and to support the development of the Irish educational system. We do this through providing high-quality evaluation, analysis, support and advice in relation to educational provision, mainly at early years, primary and post-primary levels."

CONTENTS

CONTENTS

Foreword

I am very pleased to present this Chief Inspector's Report on behalf of the Department of Education Inspectorate. It provides an analysis of, and reflection on, the quality of education provision in schools and other education settings in Ireland during the 2016 to 2020 period. The report considers the findings from inspection, advisory and research work carried out by Department of Education inspectors in a range of education contexts, including primary schools, special schools, post-primary schools, the early childhood care and education (ECCE) programme, centres for education and other types of education provision. It also encompasses the work of education settings during the COVID-19 period – a time of unprecedented challenge for children and young people, their parents, education settings and all involved in education in Ireland.

Over the 2016 to 2020 period, the education system in Ireland evolved in different ways as the chapters that follow illustrate. And, like education systems throughout the world, educators grappled with the challenges of meeting the learning and wellbeing needs of children and young people during school and setting closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

This report clearly shows that children and young people in our schools, centres for education and other education settings, including ELC settings, are benefiting greatly from the skills and commitment of education practitioners in terms of support for learning and wellbeing. While no system is perfect and, as this report also shows, there are particular aspects of our system that require development in the short to medium term, we can be justifiably proud of the quality of education provided for the children and young people in our schools, ELC and other education settings included in this report. Indeed, the positive findings about educational standards in Ireland that I have set out are also reflected in national and international measures of quality, which are also referenced in this report.

Inspection is a key component of the quality assurance of education provision in Ireland. Its focus on promoting improvement in the learning and wellbeing of children and young people, and on advancing goals of equity and inclusion, is more important today than ever, especially as we deal with the impact of COVID-19 on the educational and broader life experiences of our children and young people. The inspection findings arising from the work of the Inspectorate are presented to further the national education, inclusion and equity goals to which educators and policy makers in Ireland aspire.

A report such as this would not be possible, of course, without the dedicated work of the tens of thousands of teachers, early years educators, school and setting leaders, special needs assistants and ancillary staff who work with our young people. It also reflects the volunteerism and contribution of those who manage schools and settings throughout the country. Their work is supported by a wide range of support services and agencies, as well as by the work and leadership of departmental officials and policy makers. It is a privilege for inspectors to contribute to this effort. I and my colleagues in the Inspectorate hope that by working with all involved, by evaluating and reporting fairly and objectively on the quality of that provision to the providers themselves, to Ministers and their Departments, and to the public, we can support the Irish education system to continue to provide high quality learning for this and future generations of children and young people. I also want to express my thanks to all of the children and young people with whom we work across all of the settings we evaluate. We learn so much from your engagements with us; and your feedback about how to improve the education system is greatly valued and makes a difference.

Our common objective is to improve the learning and life experiences of all children and young people. I trust this report will contribute to that goal.

Harold Hislop
Chief Inspector

March 2022

1

The context of the Inspectorate's work

1.1. INTRODUCTION

'Excellence in learning for all' is the vision that the Inspectorate of the Department of Education aims to achieve.

The Inspectorate carries out evaluation and advisory work in a range of settings, including recognised primary schools, special schools and post-primary schools, early learning and care settings, centres for education and other education settings. We use the evidence from our visits to these settings to provide information on the quality of educational provision, and to encourage better learning experiences and learning outcomes for all children and young people. Through our direct engagement with settings and schools, and through the provision of evidence and advice to inform policy and practice, we also seek to build the capacity of settings and schools to become self-improving learning organisations.

Most of this Chief Inspector's Report examines what we have learned about the quality of educational provision across the education system in the period from September 2016 to December 2020. At the outset, however, it is important to note some of the trends and factors that influenced the Irish education system during that period. These trends and factors influenced the context in which the schools, centres for education and other education settings that we inspect were working at that time.

This chapter focuses on six key elements of the context:

- Developments in early learning and care
- Policy development relating to primary and post-primary education
- Education expenditure
- Trends in participation and retention
- Teachers and the teaching profession
- The COVID-19 pandemic

Later chapters outline the work of the Inspectorate, and the way that we have developed our inspection approaches in schools in response to the evolving quality-assurance needs of the system.

Context

The Department's *Action Plan for Education (2016-2019)* is the policy framework for current developments in Irish schools

First 5 (2019-2028) is the policy framework for current developments in early learning and care

Wellbeing, inclusion, literacy, numeracy, STEM, digital learning, modern foreign languages and Gaeltacht education are central themes of current Department of Education strategies

An Education (Student and Parent Charter) Bill, published in 2019, aims to improve how schools engage with members of their school community

The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities has brought new obligations in relation to inclusion in education

Ireland's public expenditure on education in 2018 compared favourably with other OECD countries
- €965m in funding related to DEIS
- €8.96bn in funding related to special educational needs
- Expenditure of €77.2m on summer education programmes
- Expenditure of €133m on professional development for teachers
- €3bn capital expenditure on schools
  - 963 school building projects delivered
  - Over 100,000 permanent school places delivered
- €271m of expenditure on minor works

Early Learning and Care
- Funding for the early learning and care (ELC) sector has grown significantly
- The Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme was extended from one to two years
- There are growing numbers of early years educators in the system
- The proportion of early years educators with an ELC qualification at level 7 or higher rose from 12% in 2012 to 34% in 2021

Numbers of learners
- In 2020/2021, approximately 105,000 children were enrolled on the ECCE programme
- The number of learners at primary level has peaked
- The number of students at post-primary level is projected to grow until 2024/25

	2016/2017	2017/2018	2018/2019	2019/2020	2020/2021
Primary	558,314	563,459	567,772	567,716	561,411
Post-primary	352,257	357,408	362,899	371,450	379,184
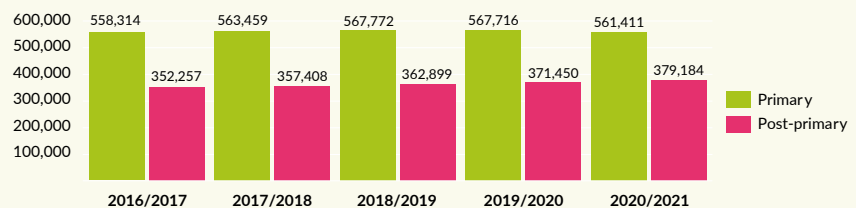
Inspections and reports

The proportion of early school leavers remains stable	There are growing numbers of teachers in the system	The overall pupil-teacher ratio in schools remains higher than the OECD average	The Department is taking a range of actions to address teacher supply challenges	Progress has been made in the restructuring of initial teacher education
Additional Irish-medium teacher education programmes have been launched	The *Cosán* Framework was launched to recognise and promote teachers' ongoing professional learning	The COVID-19 pandemic required rapid policy responses and increased expenditure	The Calculated Grades process put in place instead of the Leaving Certificate in 2020 and the Accredited Grades process of 2021 required extensive collaboration between all stakeholders	The Inspectorate adapted the ways in which it interacted with schools during the pandemic

Key messages

The role of student voice in policy-making is increasing	There has been significant growth in expenditure to support learners with special educational needs	Challenges related to recruitment and retention of early years educators and teachers are being addressed	Collaboration between the Department and stakeholders has deepened during the pandemic and has the potential for further development

1.2 DEVELOPMENTS IN EARLY LEARNING AND CARE

Policy responsibility for the early learning and care (ELC) sector lies with the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY). As the Department of Education Inspectorate, we have a quality assurance role in relation to the educational aspects of some ELC settings. This report does not attempt to fully reflect the ELC sector or the work of the DCEDIY in relation to that sector, but relevant contextual information relating to the 2016-2020 period for the ELC sector is provided below. Chapter 3 provides specific information on the education-focused inspections carried out in settings that deliver the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme.[1]

1.2.1 POLICY AND REFORMS

First 5, a Whole-of-Government strategy, set the policy framework for the development of the early learning and care sector

The main policy framework guiding the development of the ELC sector is _First 5: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families_. First 5 is a ten-year plan, covering the period 2019-2028, to help make sure all children have positive early experiences and get a good start in life. It commits to major initiatives on family leave, children's health services, parenting supports, child-friendly communities, and ELC services among a broad range of actions.

The Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth led an ambitious programme of reforms in the early learning and care sector

During the period covered by this report, there was an ambitious programme of reforms underway in the ELC sector, led by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY), working in conjunction with other Departments and agencies. Since 2019, the reforms have been advanced within the policy framework provided by _First 5_. This programme of reforms is a clear recognition of the value of high quality early learning and care, not only for children and families but for society as a whole. These reforms include:

Figure 1.1:   Key early learning and care initiatives and publications 2016-2020

- The extension of the **_Early Childhood Care and Education Programme (ECCE)_** in 2016 and 2018, making two years of free pre-school available to all children

- The introduction of the **_Access and Inclusion Model (AIM)_** in 2016, to support access and meaningful participation in the ECCE programme for children with disabilities

- New regulations for ELC services in 2016 (including the introduction of a minimum qualification requirement for early years educators) and extension of regulation to school-age childcare for the first time in 2019

- The introduction of the National Childcare Scheme in 2019

- A review of the operating model for the sector, due for completion in 2022

---

1   _Further information on the ELC sector more broadly and on ECCE specifically can be found on the website of the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) (www.gov.ie/dcediy) and in the Annual Early Years Sector Profile, published by Pobal on behalf of DCEDIY (available at www.pobal.ie/research-analysis/early-years)._

Work, which commenced on these reforms in the early learning and care sector in 2020, has continued since and laid the basis for a new funding model for ELC and school-age childcare services[2]; the publication of a plan to support the further professionalisation of ELC and SAC workers[3]; arrangements to improve the pay and conditions of ELC workers[4]; plans for the regulation of non-relative childminders[5]; and OECD proposals for strengthening the quality of ELC provision[6].

1.2.2 FUNDING

Government funding for the early years sector has increased significantly

ELC and SAC services are owned and run privately, and operate either on a 'not-for-profit' or 'for-profit' basis. However, Government funding for early learning and care, which is managed by DCEDIY, has increased significantly in recent years. As of 2020, DCEDIY funding stood at €638m up from €260m in 2015 (Table 1.1). In 2022, funding will reach €716 million. This excludes the significant spending on COVID-19 supports for the sector, including the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme. _First 5_ commits to reaching funding levels of approximately €1 billion by 2028.

Table 1.1: Budget allocations for Early Learning and Care and School Age Childcare €m, 2015-2020

Early Learning Care and School Age Childcare Outturn	2015 (€m)	2016 (€m)	2017 (€m)	2018 (€m)	2019 (€m)	2020 (€m)
	260	344	464	485	574	638

Source: Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth

Note: Sector-specific expenditure in 2020 was reduced significantly as a result of COVID-19, which resulted in temporary closure and reduced participation in ELC and SAC settings. The table above does not show whole-of-Government supports in 2020 through the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme and the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme.

1.2.3 THE EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE AND EDUCATION PROGRAMME

All eligible children are entitled to avail of up to two full academic years on the Early Childhood Care and Education programme

While DCEDIY funding schemes support the participation of children in ELC and SAC from the age of 6 months to the age of 14 years old, this report focuses on children's experience in the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme which, during the period covered by this report, was the aspect of ELC provision inspected by the Department of Education Inspectorate.

---

2   Expert Group First 5 Funding Model (2021) Partnership for the Public Good: A New Funding Model for Early Learning and Care and School Age Settings- Report of the Expert Group to develop a new funding model for Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare (2021). Available at: https://first5fundingmodel.gov.ie/publications-2/

3   Government of Ireland (2021) Nurturing Skills: The Workforce Plan for Early Learning and Care (ELC and School-Age Childcare (SAC), 2022-2028. Available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/97056-nurturing-skills-the-workforce-plan-for-early-learning-and-care-elc-and-school-age-childcare-sac-2022-2028/

4   For example, a Joint Labour Committee for Early Years Services was established in 2021. See https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2021/si/292/made/en/print

5   Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (2021) The National Action Plan for Childminding 2021-2028. Available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/campaigns/df207-national-action-plan-for-childminding-2021-2028/

6   OECD (2021) Strengthening Early Childhood Education and Care in Ireland: Review on sector quality. Available at: https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/strengthening-early-childhood-education-and-care-in-ireland_72fab7d1-en

The ECCE programme was launched in 2010 offering 38 weeks of early learning and care to all eligible children. In 2016 and again in 2018, the offer of free pre-school was extended and, since then, children can start this programme when they are 2 years and 8 months of age and avail of it for two years, provided that they are not older than 5 years and 6 months at the end of their participation in the programme.

ECCE provides children with their first formal experience of early learning prior to commencing primary school. The programme provides important development opportunities to all young children, in particular children from disadvantaged backgrounds and children with disabilities. The programme has a 95% uptake rate, with almost 40% of low-income families having said they would not have been able to enrol their child in pre-school had it not been for this programme. Since 2016, more than 5,000 children with disabilities are being supported to participate in ECCE each year through Access and Inclusion Model (AIM). In the 2019/2020 programme year, there were 4,398 services contracted to provide the ECCE programme nationally. In 2020/2021, approximately 105,000 children were enrolled on the ECCE programme (attending either their first or second year).

At the time of publication of this report, plans were in place for a review of the ECCE programme to inform its further evolution and as a precursor to putting the programme on a statutory footing and introducing a universal legal entitlement to pre-school, in line with a commitment in *First 5*.

1.2.4 EARLY YEARS EDUCATORS

The number of staff working in early learning and care, and school-age childcare settings is growing

According to the Annual Early Years Sector Profile 2019/2020, more than 30,880 staff were working in the ELC and SAC sector across Ireland in 2020. This represents a 20% increase on the estimated number in 2016 (25,650[7]). While the majority of staff work directly with children, some are in ancillary roles such as management, administration, catering and maintenance.

The provision of continuing professional development opportunities for ELC staff, to ensure children's learning is of high quality, is a key area of focus for the ELC sector

First 5 commits to furthering the professionalisation of the ELC workforce, including achieving a graduate-led workforce by 2028, and *Nurturing Skills* sets out a series of actions to achieve this commitment, as well as to strengthen supports for leadership and for continuing professional development.

During the period since 2016, DCEDIY, working in collaboration with the Department of Education and a range of agencies including the national Quality Development Service in Better Start and the NCCA, has progressively strengthened supports for continuing professional development. Measures have included the provision of mentoring and training supports for ELC services by Better Start, the National Síolta Aistear Initiative, child protection training, and a range of training supports within AIM to support inclusive practice.

The level of qualifications in the early learning and care workforce increased

The level of qualifications in the ELC workforce has been rising steadily, supported by a range of DCEDIY initiatives. As part of new Regulations in 2016, a minimum qualification was introduced at Level 5 on the *National Framework of Qualifications* (NFQ) . DCEDIY funding also supports early years educators to upskill to level 7 and 8 qualification. DCEDIY also provides higher capitation payments to ECCE services with lead educators (previously termed 'room leaders') who have relevant level 7/8 qualifications. Since 2017, a *Learner Fund* has supported 2,761 early years educators with the cost of undertaking relevant degrees[8]. Assisted by these measures, the proportion of early years educators with an ELC qualification at level 7 or higher rose from 12% in 2012 to 34% in 2021[9]. In parallel, the Department of Education and Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) have led processes of raising the standards of qualifications at levels 5 to 8.

---

7   Source: Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth
8   Source: Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth
9   Source: Government of Ireland (2021) Nurturing Skills: The Workforce Plan for ELC and SAC, 2022-2028, p.32.

1.2.5 SUPPORT FOR INCLUSION

The *Access and Inclusion Model* was launched in 2016 to ensure that children with disabilities can access the ECCE programme

The *Access and Inclusion Model* (AIM) was launched in 2016, led by DCEDIY on an inter-departmental and inter-agency basis. This child-centred model of support is designed to ensure that children with disabilities can access the ECCE Programme. Its goal is to empower early years educators in ELC settings to provide an inclusive experience and to ensure that every eligible child can participate meaningfully in the ECCE Programme, and benefit from high-quality early learning and care.

AIM includes both universal and targeted supports. The supports provided respond to the needs of the child in the pre-school context, and do not require a diagnosis. Universal supports, which include staff training, are designed to create a more inclusive culture in ELC settings. Where universal supports are not enough to meet the needs of an individual child, targeted supports are available, including specialist advice (through Better Start) and funding for additional staffing and equipment. As part of AIM, DCEDIY also supports ELC settings by providing continuing professional development, including: *LINC Programme*, a leadership for inclusion programme that provides training for an inclusion coordinator role in every ECCE setting, to lead inclusive practice and embed a culture of inclusion; diversity, equality and inclusion training; as well as Hanen, Lámh[10], and a sensory processing e-learning programme.

Since AIM was introduced in 2016, there has been a steady increase in the number of services and the number of children receiving targeted support. In 2016/2017, 1,283 ELC settings and 2,486 children were supported under AIM. In 2019/2020, AIM supported 2,428 services in respect of 5,708 children.[11]

An evaluation of AIM has commenced and is due for completion in 2022. *First 5* commits, subject to evaluation findings and other relevant developments, to consider enhancements to, and/or extension of, AIM to, for example, all ELC services, all school-age childcare services and/or to children with additional needs other than a disability.

The DCEDIY is committed to the provision of additional support to ELC settings to mitigate the impacts of early disadvantage

Data[12] on inclusion of children from disadvantaged backgrounds in ELC and SAC indicates that, in 2020, 18% of settings reported at least one Traveller child attending, and 9% of settings reported at least one Roma child attending. 69% of settings reported having at least one child for whom neither English nor Irish was a first language, with 10,187 children from this group taking part in the ECCE programme in 2019-20.

Nevertheless, although approximately 95% of all eligible children take-up a place on the ECCE programme, a lower proportion of children from particular socio-economic and ethnic and groups avail of a place. Data[13] for 2018/2019 relating to entrants starting compulsory primary education shows that only 73% from a Roma ethnic background, 77% of Irish Travellers and 91.4% from other, including mixed backgrounds came from an early childhood setting[14] compared to 95% with a white or white Irish ethnic background. There were also variations according to DEIS status of schools; in 2018/2019, a higher proportion of entrants to junior infant classes in mainstream non-DEIS national schools (95%) came from an early childhood setting compared with entrants in mainstream DEIS national schools (91.6%).

---

10 *Lámh is a manual sign system that is used in Ireland by children and adults with intellectual disability and communication needs.*

11 *Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth and Pobal (2021) Annual Early Years Sector Profile Report 2019-2020. Available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/66671-annual-early-years-sector-profile-report-201920/ and https://www.pobal.ie/research-analysis/early-years/*

12 *Source: Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth*

13 *Source: Department of Education Primary Online Database 2018/2019*

14 *An early childhood setting may be a "childcare setting, setting providing pre-primary education, an early start programme or a junior school associated with the primary school".*

Inclusion is also supported through the National Childcare Scheme[15], which provides higher levels of subsidy for families with lower incomes, and which, through sponsorship arrangements involving a number of referring Departments and agencies, provides free places for families with high levels of need. In addition, DCEDIY is committed to the development of mechanisms to provide additional supports to ELC settings to mitigate the impacts of early disadvantage where there are high proportions of children who are at risk of poverty. Since 2020, plans have been put in place to develop a model of supports building on recommendations set out in *Partnership for the Public Good: A New Funding Model for Early Learning and Care and School Age Settings.*

1.3. POLICY DEVELOPMENT: PRIMARY AND POST-PRIMARY EDUCATION

The Department's 2016-2019 Action Plan for Education set the framework for educational policy development

The Department's *Action Plan for Education 2016-2019* set the overall policy framework for the development of the Irish education system for the period to which to which the report refers. This plan aimed to make the Irish education and training service the best in Europe by 2026. The Action Plan for Education framework involved the development of detailed annual action plans and the publication of quarterly progress reports and end-of-year reviews.

As part of the 2016-2019 Action Plan, the Department launched a range of national initiatives and placed considerable emphasis on Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) education, as well as creativity, digital technologies, education for sustainable development, and wellbeing. The introduction of these key strategies addressed several areas where curriculum development was needed. However, the simultaneous implementation of a number of strategies in a relatively short period of time posed challenges for schools.

Considerable investment was made in infrastructure and Gaeltacht education, and the progression of new curricula and subject specifications at primary and post-primary level.

The Department of Education published a number of key documents and strategies for schools

The period 2016-2020 saw the publication of a number of key policies and strategies by the Department (Figure 1.3). It also saw the publication of policy and strategy documents or the establishment of initiatives by other Government Departments, which had important implications for educational provision (Figure 1.4). During this period, progress was also made in the implementation of previously published policies and strategies such as the *Digital Strategy for Schools 2015-2020*, and the *National Strategy on Education for Sustainable Development in Ireland, 2014-2020* (Information on progress made in implementation of the National Strategy on Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) is provided in Chapter 9).

The documents published during the 2016-2020 period emphasised the need to develop educational provision to suit the changing needs of young people, and a commitment to listening to the voice of learners in key aspects of educational policy making. The publication of new strategy documents and the review of existing policies and strategies marked a renewed commitment to supporting the wellbeing of learners, and to ensuring that they developed the necessary competencies in literacy and numeracy, STEM, digital learning and modern foreign languages. The commitment of the Department and the Government to the promotion of Irish was evident in the publication of the *Policy on Gaeltacht Education* in 2017 and the inclusion in the *Action Plan 2018-2022* associated with the *20-Year Strategy for the Irish language 2010-2030* of specific actions in relation to the teaching of some subjects through Irish in English-medium schools. The publication of a new Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) plan in 2017, *DEIS Plan 2017*, also highlighted a renewed commitment by the Department to improving education outcomes for children and

---

15 Further information is available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/campaigns/f8319-national-childcare-scheme/

young people at greatest risk of disadvantage and social exclusion. Other events such as the establishment of Creative Ireland in 2017 and the launch of the *National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making* in 2019 also had important implications for educational provision in terms of promoting creativity and enhancing engagement with learners. Promoting the voice of children and young people was a key consideration for the Department and the Inspectorate in the development of policies and practice during the 2016-2020 period. Whole of Government policy strategies and frameworks such as *Better Outcomes Brighter Futures: The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People, 2014-2020* and *First 5: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019-2028* also influenced educational policy and provision during the 2016-2020 period.

Two sets of publications during the 2016-2020 period had significant implications for the quality of care and provision in schools. The first set, *Looking at Our School 2016: A Quality Framework for Primary Schools* (LAOS) and *Looking at Our School 2016: A Quality Framework for Post-Primary Schools*, were published in 2016. These were the first-ever quality frameworks for Irish schools, and their publication was widely welcomed throughout the educational system. They set out, for the first time, a set of standards in teaching and learning, and in leadership and management for the school system.

During 2016 and 2017, the Department also undertook an extensive review of its child protection procedures for schools in collaboration with the education partners. This culminated in the publication of new *Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools* in December 2017 to coincide with the commencement of the *Children First Act, 2015* by the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs. These new procedures provided for an increased rigour in supporting and monitoring child protection in schools and settings.

Figure 1.3: Key Department of Education initiatives and publications 2016-2020

Looking at Our School 2016, A Quality Framework for Primary Schools and *Looking at Our School 2016, A Quality Framework for Post-Primary Schools*, were launched in October 2016. These quality frameworks provided a set of clear, definable standards to promote a shared understanding of, and discourse on, quality in teaching and learning and in leadership and management in primary and post-primary schools. As such, they were designed to inform both internal evaluation (school self-evaluation (SSE)) and external evaluation (school inspection).

Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools 2017: These procedures gave direction and guidance to school authorities and school personnel in relation to meeting their statutory obligations under the *Children First Act 2015*, and in the implementation of the best practice guidance set out in the *Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children* (2017). During the period to which this report refers, the Inspectorate advised, evaluated and reported on the implementation of these Procedures in a range of ways though all of its inspections in primary and post-primary schools.

The Digital Strategy for Schools 2015-2020 (and *annual action plans 2017-2019*): The Digital Strategy set out a clear vision for integrating digital technology into teaching, learning and assessment practices in schools over five years. To progress its implementation, the strategy was supported by annual action plans in 2017, 2018 and 2019. A cross-sectoral evaluation of the use of digital technologies in ELC settings, primary schools and post-primary schools was conducted by the Inspectorate in 2019[16]. At the time of writing of this report, a consultation process for the development of a new Digital Strategy for Schools had commenced.

---

16 Department of Education and Skills (2020) *Digital Learning 2020: Reporting on practice in Early Learning and Care, Primary and Post-Primary Contexts. Available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/c0053-digital-learning-2020-reporting-on-practice-in-early-learning-and-care-primary-and-post-primary-contexts/*

The Literacy and Numeracy Strategy (2011-2020): Interim Review 2011-2016; New Targets 2017-2020: The National Strategy: Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life 2011-2020 set out a vision for raising standards in early learning and care, and school settings. The Report of the Interim Review 2011-2016, published in 2017, highlighted that while there were significant achievements in literacy, there remained a need to improve achievement in numeracy, and to address the gap in achievement between learners in schools with the highest concentration of disadvantage and those in other schools. The Report put forward new priority actions and targets deemed necessary to enhance learners' achievements in numeracy and to advance other key priorities such as tackling educational disadvantage, enabling higher-achieving learners to reach their full potential, improving literacy, for and through, the Irish language and enhancing the digital literacy skills of learners.

The Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice: was published by the Department in 2018 and refreshed in 2019. The Policy Statement provided a definition of wellbeing, and an overarching structure that encompassed existing, ongoing and developing work in the area of wellbeing in education. It was informed by international research and practice and the many relevant policies and guidelines that were already available to schools and centres for education including Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework, the Social Personal and Health Education (SPHE) curriculum at primary level, and the Junior Cycle Wellbeing Programme at post-primary level. The Policy Statement set out the ambition and vision that the promotion of wellbeing would be at the core of the ethos of every school and centre for education in Ireland. It included the intention that all schools would embark on their wellbeing promotion process by 2023. In view of the impact of COVID-19 on school activities, this date was changed to 2025[17].

The **_STEM Education Policy Statement 2017–2026_** and **_STEM Education Implementation Plan 2017-2019_**: The STEM Education Policy Statement provides a roadmap for collaborative action between the Department of Education and other stakeholders. It also serves as a resource for schools and settings in planning the provision of a high quality STEM experience for children and young people of all abilities. A cross-sectoral evaluation of how the STEM education plan was being implemented was conducted by the Inspectorate in ELC settings, primary and post-primary schools in 2019[18].

Languages Connect - Ireland's Strategy for Foreign Languages in Education 2017-2026 and **_Languages Connect Implementation Plan 2017-2022_**: The Strategy was developed in the context of Action 1.6 of the Department's _Action Plan for Education 2016-2019_ which aimed to enable learners to communicate effectively and improve their competence in languages. The Strategy, supported by the Implementation Plan, aims to increase the uptake of key foreign languages generally and, in particular, the number of schools offering two or more foreign languages and the number of students sitting two languages for state examinations. In 2020, the Inspectorate published a report[19] on the findings of subject inspections on modern languages carried out between October 2016 and September 2019. The report also included a section on the experience of children in early learning and care settings and primary school, whose mother tongue is not English, of learning an additional language.

---

17 Department of Education Circulars 0018/2021, 0032/2021 and 0033/2021 advised schools of the updated requirements.

18 Department of Education and Skills (2020) STEM Education 2020: Reporting on Practice in Early Learning and Care, Primary and Post-Primary Contexts. Available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/065e9-stem-education-2020-reporting-on-practice-in-early-learning-and-care-primary-and-post-primary-contexts/.

19 Department of Education and Skills (2020) Modern Foreign Languages: A Report on the Quality of Practice in Post-primary Schools. Available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/d4504-modern-foreign-languages-a-report-on-the-quality-of-practice-in-post-primary-schools/

The **Policy on Gaeltacht Education 2017-2022 (2016)**: This was the first Gaeltacht-specific education policy in the history of the State. It is intended to help fulfil the ambition in the Government's _20-Year Strategy for the Irish Language 2010-2030_ to maintain and extend the use of Irish as a spoken language. Its overarching goal is to ensure the availability of a high quality and relevant Irish-medium education experience for all young people living in Gaeltacht areas and, in this way, to support the use of Irish as the main language of families and of Gaeltacht communities. Specifically, the policy aims to ensure that a sufficient number of schools and ELC settings use Irish as the language of communication and instruction for all areas of learning (apart from English and other languages), in each of the Language-Planning Areas within the Gaeltacht (as set out under the _Gaeltacht Act 2012_).

The **DEIS Plan 2017,** which replaced the Action Plan launched in 2005, set out the Department's vision for future intervention in the area of social inclusion in education policy. The plan set out new goals to be achieved in relation to improving outcomes for children and young people in primary and post-primary schools, particularly for those in communities at risk of disadvantage and social exclusion. Further information on this plan and progress on its implementation is provided in Chapter 6.

Figure 1.4: Other Government Department initiatives and publications impacting on educational provision 2016-2020

20-Year Strategy for the Irish language 2010-2030 and the associated **Action Plan 2018-2022**: These included the Department's commitment to explore a Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) approach to implementing partial immersion in Irish in schools and early years settings. A three-year CLIL[20] project commenced in September 2019 with the aim of improving learner competence, confidence and disposition towards Irish in English-medium ELC settings and in primary and post-primary schools.

Creative Ireland was established in 2017 following the success of Ireland 2016, the State initiative to mark the hundredth anniversary of the Easter Rising. Creative Ireland is a five-year all-of-Government culture and wellbeing programme that aims to inspire and transform people, places and communities through creativity. The Programme is built around the key themes: Creative Youth, Creative Communities, Creative Places, and Creative Nation.

The **National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making 2015-2020**: The aim of the strategy was to ensure that children and young people have a voice in their individual and collective everyday lives. The strategy was guided and influenced by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and the _EU Charter of Fundamental Rights_[21]

---

20 A CLIL approach provides for the delivery of aspects of the curriculum through a language that is not the medium of instruction in the school.

21 In 2021, the National Framework for Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making was published.

> ### _Better Outcomes Brighter Futures: The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People,_
> ### _2014-2020_ (launched in 2014): This was the first overarching national policy framework for children and young people (aged 0-24 years). The Policy Framework adopted a whole-of-Government approach that aligned government commitments to children and young people with five national outcomes: active and healthy; achieving in all areas of learning and development; safe and protected from harm; economic security and opportunity; connected, respected and contributing. It set out transformation goals for achieving these outcomes for children and young people.

> ### _First 5, A Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019-2028_ (launched in
> November 2018): This whole-of-Government strategy sets out a road map to improve the lives of babies, young children and their families over the next decade. It aims ensure that every child has positive early experiences and can make a great start in life. It sets out a road map for change and development over the coming decade. One of the key goals of the strategy is the reform of the ELC system, including a new funding model.

> ### _The National Strategy on Education for Sustainable Development in Ireland, 2014 -2020_: one of the
> key strategies underpinning the Action Plan for Education 2016-2019, aims to ensure that education contributes to sustainable development by equipping children and young people with the relevant knowledge, the key dispositions and skills and the values that will motivate and empower them through their lives to become informed, active citizens who take action for a more sustainable future. More detail on this strategy is provided in Chapter 9.

Curriculum developments in schools included the roll-out of a revised primary language curriculum and the implementation of junior cycle reform

As noted above, a number of strategy documents were launched in the period that had medium and long-term implications for curriculum provision in areas such as STEM, Languages and Digital Learning. More immediately, primary schools were involved in the roll-out of the Primary Language Curriculum (PLC) which began with Junior Infants to Second Class during the 2016/17 school year and was available for all class levels during the 2019/2020 year. The PLC has the same structure and strands for both English and Irish, and is designed for pupils of all abilities in all primary schools: English-medium schools, Gaeltacht schools and Irish-medium schools, and special schools.

At post-primary level, the phased implementation of curriculum and assessment changes at Junior Cycle continued, with all revised curriculum specifications in place for the student cohort that commenced Junior Cycle in September 2019. These curriculum changes are discussed in more detail in later chapters, but it should be noted here that both sets of changes posed implementation challenges and required significant investment in teachers' professional development.

There has been extensive consultation on the development of a legislative framework to provide for a student and parent charter for schools

The Department engaged in extensive consultation on the development of a legislative framework to provide for a student and parent charter during the period to which this report refers. This work culminated in the publication of the _Education (Student and Parent Charter) Bill 2019_ in September 2019. The Bill, which at the time of writing has been passed by the Seanad, is continuing through the legislative process in the Dáil. It is expected that the Bill will be re-named the Education (School Community Charter) Bill.

The main aim of this proposed legislation is to improve how schools engage with members of the school community which includes children and young people, their parents and school staff. It will require all schools to have a Charter in place. One of the key concepts of the Bill is the need for a school to consult with students, parents and staff on individual school plans, policies and activities. Once the legislation is

enacted, work will commence on developing the national charter guidelines in consultation with the education partners. Those guidelines will be designed to assist schools in how they consult with, seek feedback from, and respond to children and young people in schools, their parents and school staff.

The Charter is intended to strengthen the involvement of parents, children and young people in their schools.

The Irish Government's ratification of the *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* brought new obligations in relation to inclusion in education

The United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities was adopted in 2006 and signed by Ireland in 2007. The Government formally ratified the Convention in April 2018 and Ireland submitted its first progress report to the UN in December 2020. The progress report outlined developments across a range of societal domains, including education. These included the introduction and development of the Access and Inclusion Model of support for children with special educational needs in early learning and care settings, the introduction of the School Inclusion Model and the introduction of a new Batchelor of Education programme (primary school teaching) for deaf students.

The Irish Government's ratification of the CRPD brought new obligations and reaffirmed long-standing commitments regarding an inclusive approach in our education system. These included the provision of 'reasonable' accommodation in schools and the inclusion of learners with disabilities in the general education system. In addition, Article 24 (2) of the CRPD obliges States Parties[22], among other things, to ensure that children can access an inclusive, quality and free education on an equal basis with others in the communities in which they live[23].

The UN Committee responsible for monitoring has advised education systems that operate systems that are similar to Ireland's of the need to be more inclusive. The UN Committee also recognised that such major change takes time to implement and accepted the concept of progressive realisation of policy intent over a period of time.

22 States parties are countries that have ratified or acceded to the international treaty

23 United Nations, Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), Article 24 Education, Available at:
    https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities/article-24-education.html

1.4. EXPENDITURE ON PRIMARY AND POST-PRIMARY EDUCATION

Ireland's overall expenditure on primary and post-primary education has grown

Ireland's overall expenditure on primary and post-primary education grew steadily between 2016 and 2018 as presented in Table 1.4 below. Over the two-year period, expenditure increased by €1.1bn, or 16.5%; within this, primary expenditure rose by 13.2% and post-primary expenditure rose by 15.3%. Over recent budgets, additional resources were made available to schools, including the delivery of thousands of extra teaching and special needs assistant (SNA) posts, increased capitation in schools, enhanced supports for school leadership, and an improved staffing schedule in primary schools.

Table 1.4: Public expenditure on education €m, 2016 – 2018*

	2016 (€m)	2017 (€m)	2018 (€m)
Total public expenditure on education of which	9,955	10,420	11,062
Primary	3,345	3,606	3,785
Post-primary	3,026	3,219	3,490
Total for Primary and Post-primary	6,371	6,825	7,275

Source: Statistics Section, Department of Education
*2018 is the most recent year for which total expenditure is available

Ireland's overall public expenditure on school education, as a percentage of total public expenditure, compares favourably with OECD countries

Ireland's public expenditure on primary education as a percentage of total public expenditure remained fairly constant between 2016 and 2018, rising from 4.4% to 4.5% over the period (Table 1.5). This compares very favourably with Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries where the average stood at 3.4% over the period. For the post-primary sector, expenditure rose from 4% of total public expenditure to 4.2%, similar to the OECD average of 4.4%. However, it should be noted that this growth in expenditure took place at a time when demand in terms of student numbers had grown and provision for students with special educational needs had expanded. As will be noted later in this section, Ireland compares less favourably with these countries in relation to spending per student.

Table 1.5: Public expenditure on primary and post-primary education as a percentage of total government expenditure 2016–2018, €m

	2016	2017	2018
Total public expenditure, €m	76,500	78,929	83,786
Primary expenditure as %	4.4%	4.6%	4.5%
OECD average	3.4%	3.4%	3.4%
Post-primary expenditure as %	4.0%	4.1%	4.2%
OECD average	4.5%	4.4%	4.4%

Source: OECD (2021) Education at a Glance 2021: OECD Indicators. Available at: https://www.oecd.org/education/education-at-a-glance/

The Department continued to invest in the DEIS programme and the School Excellence Fund-DEIS programme was launched

The Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) Programme is the Department's main policy instrument to tackle educational disadvantage. The Department continued to invest significantly in this programme with funding increasing between 2016 and 2018 (Table 1.6). In September 2017, 79 additional schools were included in the programme and 30 schools were upgraded from Band 2 to Band 1 status. An additional €5m was allocated to meet the initial costs of this in 2017, with a further €10m allocated from 2018 onwards to cover the annual costs of the increased number of schools (Table 1.6). Other than the inclusion of new schools in 2017, the number of schools in the DEIS programme remained largely unchanged between 2005 and 2017. In the 2019/20 academic year, the DEIS Programme was available in 891 schools serving over 185,000 students.

During the 2016-2018 period, the School Completion Programme was funded by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (now the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth) and the School Meals Programme was funded by the Department of Social Protection (DSP)[24]. Both of these programmes are DEIS school supports. The School Excellence Fund (SEF) was launched in November 2017 and the funding provided for innovative programmes in DEIS schools under SEF-DEIS more than doubled between 2018 and 2019.

Table 1.6: Funding related to DEIS €m, 2016-2020

	2016 (€m)	2017 (€m)	2018 (€m)	2019 (€m)	2020 (€m)
Overall expenditure on DEIS (DE)	110	115	125	125	125
School Excellence Fund	NIL	NIL	0.3	0.6	0.4
School Completion Programme (DCEDIY)	24.7	24.7	24.7	24.7	24.7
School Meals Programme (DSP)[25]	36.9	46.6	49.2	54.3	53.5

Source: Department of Education

Significant growth continued in expenditure related to special educational needs

Expenditure on provision for learners with special educational needs (SEN) for primary and post-primary schools has grown considerably over the last decade. In 2020, overall expenditure by the Department, including that for primary and post-primary schools, was just over €2 billion, and represented an increase of 64% since 2011, up from €1.25 billion (Table 1.7). The expenditure grew each year from 2016 to 2020 and reflected considerable increases in special education teachers, SNAs, and school transport expenditure. In 2020, SEN expenditure represented over 19% of the Department's budget.

---

24 *In January 2021, Tusla Education Support Services, including SCP, transferred from the remit of the Minister for DCEDIY to the remit of the Minister for Education.*

25 *These figures reflect the overall expenditure by the Department of Social Protection on the School Meals Programme. The programme is offered to all DEIS schools, but also includes provision for a small number of schools that are not in the DEIS programme for example, through the Hot School Meals pilot.*

Table 1.7: Expenditure on Special Educational Needs 2016-2020 (€m)

	2016 (€m)	2017 (€m)	2018 (€m)	2019 (€m)	2020 (€m)
Teachers	903.3	953.8	1,056.6	1,151.3	1,218.8
SNAs	428.3	478.1	520.3	564.4	613.7
School Transport	83.5	91.8	107.6	120.9	117.6
Further Education (Including National Training Fund).	47.4	47.1	46.3	43.7	42.8
NEPS[26]	16.9	18.5	19.3	20.4	21.1
NCSE	8.0	11[27]	13.0	14.1	14.2
3rd Level Student Disabilities Fund	7.6	9.8	10.1	11.1	7.8
Additional Capitation	10.4	8.2	8.9	9.3	10.00
Miscellaneous Grants (Exams, ICDU, Equipment etc.)	18.2	18.1	13.4	13.9	7.8
TOTAL	**1,523.6**	**1636.4**	**1,795.5**	**1,949.2**	**2,053.6**

Source: Department of Education

Funding was provided towards an extended school year for children with severe or profound learning disability or with an autism spectrum disorder; the level of funding increased considerably in 2020 to mitigate the impact of COVID-19

During the 2016-2020 period, the Department continued to fund the July Provision Programme Grant Scheme. This initiative provides funding towards an extended school year for children with a severe or profound general learning disability or children with autism. Table 1.8 shows that there has been a considerable increase in funding over the period to which this report refers. The most notable increase was in 2020 where the additional funding provided was aimed at mitigating the impact of COVID-19 and school closures on the learning and wellbeing of children with ASD.

Table 1.8: Expenditure on July Provision 2016-2020, €m

	2016 (€m)	2017 (€m)	2018 (€m)	2019 (€m)	2020 (€m)
July Provision	12.6	13.6	15.1	15.5	20.4

Source: Social Inclusion Unit, Department of Education

In 2020, the funding facilitated an expanded programme for children with special educational needs and students in DEIS schools

In 2020, the government provided additional funding to facilitate a significantly expanded summer programme for children with special educational needs and also for students in DEIS schools. The aim was to help address the concerns that families were feeling over the loss of in-school time and learning

---

26 *The psychological services provided by NEPS support all children and young people in schools, including those with SEN. The expansion of the NEPS service over the 2016-2020 period was largely to support the wellbeing of all children and young people, albeit with a particular focus on those with SEN and those attending DEIS schools.*

27 *In 2017, the NCSE expanded to include Visiting Teachers, Special Education Support Service (SESS) and National Behaviour Support Service (NBSS).*

for children with special educational needs and those at greatest risk of disadvantage. A total of 22,840 pupils benefited from the scheme at a cost of €20.4 million.

The traditional July Provision Programme changed to *Summer Provision 2020-Reconnecting with Education* which included a programme for children with complex special educational needs. This programme was a significant expansion on the July Provision programme of previous years with the eligibility criteria widened to include approximately 9,000 additional primary aged children with complex needs. All special schools and primary schools with special classes were invited to provide the school-based summer provision for their students. Home-based provision was available where a child's local school was not providing a programme or did not have the capacity to accommodate a child in a planned programme that year. In total, 13,597 pupils availed of either school-based provision or home-based provision under the SEN programme (Table 1.9).

Numeracy and Literacy programmes were provided by 214 schools facilitating 7,000 pupils. Seventy-four DEIS post-primary schools availed of the funding to provide programmes for 2,243 students.

Table 1.9: Participation in Summer Provision Programme €m 2020

Programmes	2020 Participation		
	Number of schools	Pupils	Expenditure (€m)
Numeracy & Literacy	214	7,000	1.0
SEN School Based	255	3,881	6.3
SEN Home Based	N/A	9,716	12.5
DEIS Post-primary	74	2,243	0.6
TOTAL	**543**	**22,840**	**20.4**

Source: Department of Education

Overall spending on continuing professional development for teachers increased from 2017. During the COVID-19 pandemic, expenditure decreased, but the level of CPD provided was similar to 2019

The Teacher Education Section of the Department funds Continuing Professional Development (CPD) programmes for primary and post-primary teachers in line with national priorities. From 2017, expenditure increased to facilitate the introduction and implementation of new curriculum frameworks at both primary and post-primary levels (Table 1.10).

Owing to the COVID-19 pandemic, the delivery of CPD moved online during 2020. This did not impact on the level of CPD provided, and teachers and school leaders continued to access regular CPD events and a broad range of new CPD supports that were provided to assist schools with the move to remote teaching and learning. The level of CPD provided was similar to 2019.

However, the move to online provision of CPD did result in reduced expenditure in 2020 as some of the costs associated with face-to-face CPD provision did not arise. In addition, the amount of expenditure on part-time associates to deliver face-to-face CPD, and on travel, subsistence and ancillary costs reduced significantly.

Table 1.10: Total spend[28] by Teacher Education Section on teacher CPD, including Leadership/SEN/Inclusion

2016 (€m)	2017 (€m)	2018 (€m)	2019 (€m)	2020 (€m)
22.6	27.9	30.9	29.1	22.5

Source: Department of Education

There was significant capital expenditure on the building of new schools and to support improvement works in existing schools. A deep energy retrofit programme was piloted in older school buildings

During the 2016-2020 period, the total expenditure by the Department on the School Building Programme was three billion euro (Table 1.11). During this period, almost a thousand school building projects were delivered and over 100,000 additional and permanent replacement places[29] were provided for students.

Table 1.11 Expenditure on the School Building Programme 2016-2020

Period	School Building Programme. Total expenditure €m	Total number of School Building Projects delivered	Permanent student places delivered (additional and replacement** places)
2016-2020	€3,000	963*	In excess of 100,000

Source: Department of Education
*The number of projects includes the Large Scale and Additional Accommodation Scheme
**Places provided as a result of refurbishment

During the 2016 to 2020 period, there was also expenditure of circa €271 million under the Department's Minor Works Scheme, which relates to the provision of grants to schools primarily for the purpose of small-scale improvement works to school buildings and grounds. The expenditure on minor works during this period included €130m additional funding provided in 2020 to help schools to manage and operate in the exceptional circumstances arising from COVID-19.

Furthermore, in this period, progress was made on the provision of support for maintenance and smaller-scale works to existing schools. Funding for these works is made available through the Summer Works Scheme and the Emergency Works Scheme respectively. The Summer Works Scheme devolves funding to individual school authorities to undertake small-scale building works, whilst the Emergency Works Scheme provides funding for urgent works to those schools that are most in need of resources, either as a result of an emergency situation or on receipt of an enrolment application from a pupil/student with special educational needs.

During the period 2016-2020, a deep energy retrofit programme was piloted. The purpose of the programme was to identify and test retrofit solutions for reducing energy consumption and achieving energy efficiencies in older school buildings. The pilot was carried out under a jointly funded 'pathfinder programme' with the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI), and resulted in the completion of 39 projects. The pathfinder programme is informing a national programme for the energy retrofit of primary and post-primary schools from 2023 onwards, as included in the National Development Plan.

---

28 *The drop off in expenditure in 2020 does not relate to a reduction of supports. These savings arose from the move to online provision and the reduction of some of the costs associated with face-to-face CPD provision for example, travel and subsistence, ancillary costs and part time associates.*

29 *Permanent replacement places refer to places provided as a result of refurbishment.*

In the 2016-2020 period, a number of inspectors were assigned to support the Planning and Building Unit (PBU) in the delivery of major school projects with respect to drawing up schedules of accommodation and conducting site visits. The inspectors assigned to the PBU also provided advice on the development of school design to further support and enhance teaching and learning and the updating of equipment specifications to ensure that they are relevant to new syllabi such as the new Leaving Certificate Physical Education (LCPE) specification and Senior Cycle Physical Education Framework, and that they comply with current health and safety regulations.

1.5. TRENDS IN PARTICIPATION AND RETENTION

The number of primary schools decreased; the number of post-primary schools increased and the number of special schools remained the same

During the period September 2016 to December 2020, there was a gradual decline in the overall number of primary schools, while the number of post-primary schools increased and the number of special schools remained the same (Table 1.12). The total number of primary schools declined by eight from 3,115 in 2016 to 3,107 in 2020. The reduction in primary schools during this period was largely due to the closure of small schools with declining enrolments and the amalgamation of schools in close proximity to each other. The increase of 19 post-primary schools during this period reflects the sharp rise in enrolments at this level.

Table 1.12: Number of state-funded primary schools, special schools and post-primary schools 2016-2020

Year	Primary Schools	Special Schools (NCSE supported only)	Post-primary schools
2016/2017	3,115	114	711
2017/2018	3,111	114	715
2018/2019	3,106	114	722
2019/2020	3,106	114	723
2020/2021	3,107	114	730

Source: Statistics Section, Department of Education

The number of children has peaked in primary schools. The number of post-primary students continues to increase

The number of pupils in primary schools peaked in 2018 (Table 1.13). In 2020, enrolments at primary level stood at 561,411, down by almost 6,000 on 2019 (567,716). Enrolments at this level are now projected to fall over the coming years and may reach a low point of 440,551 by 2033 before rising again thereafter. The number of students in post-primary schools increased steadily during the 2016-2020 period and is projected to continue to grow until 2024/2025[30].

30 Department tref Education and Skills (2021) Projections of full-time enrolment Primary and Second Level 2021 – 2040. Available at: https://www.gov.ie/ga/bailiuchan/projections/

Table 1.13: Number of children and young people enrolled (full-time in primary/post-primary level) in Department-aided schools and settings 2016-2020

Year	Primary (including special schools)	Post-primary	Youthreach
2016/2017	558,314	352,257	N/A[31]
2017/2018	563,459	357,408	3,091
2018/2019	567,772	362,899	3,725[32]
2019/2020	567,716	371,450	2,672[33]
2020/2021	561,411	379,184	N/A[34]

Source: Statistics Section, Department of Education. Also see Statistical Bulletin 2020/21 and Education Indicators for Ireland 2021 available at https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/055810-education-statistics/#latest-statistical-reports

There are indications that the ECCE programme has had an impact on the age at which children start primary school

According to figures from the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (previously the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA)), 806,359 children had availed of the ECCE Programme by 2019. By then, annual Government investment in the programme had increased from €104.9m to €285.5m per year.

There are indications that the ECCE programme has had an impact on the age at which children start primary school. While over the past twenty years, there has been a steady increase in the age at which children start junior infants in primary school, there has been a sharp increase in recent years. This is most likely due to the introduction of the ECCE scheme in 2010 and its expansion to two years in 2016. Overall, the proportion of four-year-olds (and younger) in junior infants has fallen from 46.7% in 2000 to 16.9% in 2020 (Table 1.14). The later starting age of children in primary school impacts on the potential age range within classes, and at various stages of schooling. It also has implications for the content and delivery of the *Primary Curriculum 1999* which predates the ECCE Programme, in particular at Infant level.

Table 1.14: Age of children in Junior Infants

School year	Percentage of junior infants who were aged four on 1 January in their first year at school
2000/2001	46.7
2010/2011	39.2
2016/2017	27.3
2018/2019	20.9
2020/2021	16.9

Source: Department of Education (2021) Statistical Bulletin July 2021. Available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/055810-education-statistics/#latest-statistical-reports

---

31 Enrolments in Youthreach are extracted from the SOLAS Programme Learner Support Service (PLSS). As this database is relatively new, data for 2016/17 is not available.

32 Four of these students attended part-time.

33 A total of 271 of these students attended part-time and 84 attended online.

34 This data should be available in Q2 2022

The absolute number of early school leavers remains fairly steady, but the gap in retention between DEIS and non-DEIS schools has not improved

Over the period to which this report refers, it is encouraging that retention rates have remained fairly constant (Table 1.15). While there is an increase in the number of early school leavers, enrolments have also risen, so the absolute number of early school leavers remains fairly steady. However, over this time, the gap in retention to Leaving Certificate between DEIS and non-DEIS schools has not improved.

Table 1.15: Retention rates to Leaving Certificate (LC)

Indicator	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020[35]
Number of Early school leavers: started 5th year but did not sit LC in 6th year	2,417	2,486	2,639	2,823	2,438
% Early school leavers: started 5th year but did not sit LC in 6th year	4.3%	4.4%	4.8%	4.9%	4.2%
Retention rate in DEIS post-primary schools (%) LC completion	84.4%	85.0%	84.7%	83.8%	84.8%
Gap in retention rates: DEIS vs non-DEIS post-primary schools	8.5%	8.5%	8.7%	9.3%	8.6%

35 Retention rate in 2020 is measured as the percentage of pupils who sit LC from the 2014 entry cohort.

1.6. TEACHERS

1.6.1 TEACHER NUMBERS AND RATIO TO LEARNERS

There are growing numbers of teachers in the education system

The number of teachers has increased across primary and post-primary sectors. Since 2016/17, an additional 2,935 teachers have been employed in primary schools, representing an increase of 8% (1.13). An additional 4,466 teachers have been employed in post-primary schools, representing an increase of 17%. This growth in teacher numbers mainly reflects the rise in learner numbers. As shown in Table 1.16, enrolments of children and young people peaked in 2018 at primary level and are expected to peak in 2024 at post-primary level. The increase in teacher numbers also reflects the staffing schedule for schools which takes account of provision for new, developing and small schools, the staffing appeals process, and the teacher allocation process (which is based on school enrolments from the previous year).

In 2020/21, the Department of Education provided additional staffing to support schools during the COVID-19 pandemic. All teaching principals at primary level were provided with a minimum of one release day per week to relieve the administrative burden arising from the changes and the impacts of COVID-19, and a new measure was introduced to provide deputy principals with some release days, ranging from 5 days to 16 days depending on the school size, to support administrative principals.

Table 1.16: Number of teachers (whole-time equivalents) in Department-aided schools 2016-2020

Year	2016/2017	2017/2018	2018/2019	2019/2020	2020/2021
Primary Teachers, including in special schools	35,669	36,773	37,341	37,839	38,604
Mainstream primary teachers	22,152	22,430	22,747	22,970	23,460
Other primary teachers, including teachers in special schools and SEN teachers in mainstream schools	13,517	14,343	14,594	14,869	15,144
Post-primary Teachers	26,273[36]	27,919	28,474	29,093	30,739
Total number of teachers	61,942	64,692	65,815	66,932	69,343

Source: Statistics Section, Department of Education. Also see Education Indicators for Ireland 2021 at https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/055810-education-statistics/#latest-statistical-reports

While there has been a significant increase in the number of teachers, the average class size in primary schools remains high

The substantial increase in the overall number of teachers in schools in recent years continued the trend from the previous *Chief Inspector's Report 2013-2016*. Over the period to which this report refers, the growth in teacher numbers can be attributed, in particular, to the greater number of teachers deployed in learner support roles. The number of teachers deployed in mainstream teaching positions grew at a slower pace. This means that, while the increased number of teachers resulted in a lower overall pupil teacher-ratio (PTR), average class size in primary schools remained more constant (Table 1.17). The average class size was higher than OECD countries; Irish primary schools had 24.1 pupils per class on average in 2019, compared to 21 pupils on average across OECD countries[37].

---

36 *The figure for 2015/2016 cited in the last Chief Inspector's Report was 26,804. This figure included teachers of PLC courses. PLC figures are not included in this table.*

37 *OECD (2021) Education at a Glance 2021: OECD Indicators. Available at: https://www.oecd.org/education/education-at-a-glance/*

The high average class size presented significant challenges for schools as they prepared to reopen during the COVID-19 pandemic. This was particularly evident as schools worked to implement protocols on physical distancing for learners. In order to alleviate the burden on schools, funding was made available for 1,000 additional teachers in post-primary schools to help reduce class sizes and to provide primary schools with substitute staff. Significant additional funding was also provided by the Department so that schools could employ replacement teaching staff[38] as well as additional special needs assistants and administrative staff.

Table 1.17: Pupil teacher ratio and average class size 2016-2020

Year	2016/2017	2017/2018	2018/2019	2019/2020	2020/2021
PTR: Average number of pupils per teacher in primary schools	15.7	15.3	15.2	15.0	14.5
Average class size in primary schools	24.7	24.5	24.3	24.1	23.3
PTR: Average number of students per teacher in post-primary schools	13.4	12.8	12.7	12.7	12.4

Source: Statistics Section, Department of Education. Also see Statistical Bulletin 2020/21 at https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/055810-education-statistics/#latest-statistical-reports; Key Statistics 2019/2020 and 2020/2021 at https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/key-statistics/

1.6.2 SALARIES

The starting salaries of primary and post-primary teachers are above the OECD average

Comparative data[39] on teachers' 2020 salaries indicates that, because of the common starting scale, the starting salary for teachers at primary, lower secondary and upper secondary level is the same, whereas internationally it varies by level and also within the secondary sector. Starting salaries in Ireland are 2% lower than the OECD average in upper secondary education, 3% higher in lower secondary education and 6% higher in primary education (Table 1.18). Starting salaries in Ireland are also higher than the EU22 average at primary and lower secondary phases.

Table 1.18: Teachers' average starting salary in 2020 in Ireland – comparison with OECD and EU22 countries

	Primary	Lower Secondary	Upper Secondary
Ireland (USD)	37,096	37,096	37,096
OECD Average (USD)	34,942	36,116	37,811
EU22 Average (USD)	35,220	36,587	37,571

Source: OECD (2021) Education at a Glance 2021. Available at https://www.oecd.org/education/education-at-a-glance/

---

38 This could occur where staff members who were identified in line with HSE guidance as at 'very high risk' of Covid-19 were advised to cocoon

39 Statutory salaries reported in this indicator are not the same as actual expenditures on salaries. Differences in taxation, pension provision and various non-salary benefits are not factored into these comparisons.

Throughout the period to which this report refers, a long-standing industrial relations issue concerning teachers' salaries persisted between teachers' unions and the Department of Education. The dispute centred on a salary differential between teachers hired before the economic crisis in 2011 and those hired after that date at a lower salary. The issue had not been completely resolved at the time of writing this report.

1.6.3 INSTRUCTION TIME

Classroom teaching time in Irish primary schools is greater than the OECD average

Over the course of a school year, primary teachers spend an average of 905 hours teaching while the corresponding figure for post-primary teachers is 704 hours. Overall teaching time in Ireland at primary level is above the OECD average (Table 1.19). Teaching time in Ireland is organised over marginally fewer days per year than the average in OECD countries, but for more hours per day. It should be noted that the teachers' contract in many OECD countries includes additional non-contact time and the overall statutory working time of teachers in many OECD countries extends well beyond their compulsory teaching time. In Ireland, the calculation of teachers' time in school refers almost exclusively to time spent in classrooms teaching, and does not take account of the range of other teaching-related tasks (such as planning and assessment of students' work) which form part of teachers' professional practice.

It is a welcome development that, since September 2017 in all subject areas, full-time teachers involved in the delivery of Junior Cycle are entitled to an annual allocation of twenty-two hours of professional time (forty minutes per week), with a pro-rata entitlement for part-time teachers.[40] This arrangement brings the work practice of Irish teachers closer to international norms, where teachers' contracts include both teaching time and non-student contact time. While the arrangements for professional time at Junior Cycle were operated satisfactorily by many schools and teachers, it is regrettable that some industrial action impeded the full implementation of this measure which consequently had an adverse impact on teacher-student contact time in some post-primary schools.

Table 1.19: Details of teachers' working time in Ireland-comparison with OECD and EU22 countries

2020	Ireland	OECD average	EU22 average	Ireland	OECD average	EU22 average
	Primary			Post-primary*		
Number of weeks of instruction	37	38	37	33	38	37
Number of days of instruction	183	184	180	165	184	179
Net teaching time, in hours	909	791	738	704	723	660
Total statutory working time, in hours	n/a	1,553	1,525	n/a	1,575	1,566

Source: OECD (2021) Education at a Glance 2021. Available at https://www.oecd.org/education/education-at-a-glance/
*Calculated for compulsory second-level only due to unavailability of comparable data for OECD and EU23 countries at upper-secondary level

40 Department of Education and Skills (2017) Circular 0015/2017: Arrangements for the Implementation of the Framework for Junior Cycle with particular reference to school years 2017/18 and 2018/19. Available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/circular/4c9124150d5141f6ae918da2816b9592/

Teachers' involvement in the delivery of examinations impacts on instruction time

The State Examinations Commission (SEC) hires approximately 3,000 teachers each year to assist in the delivery of state oral and practical examinations. These teachers' classes are taught by substitute teachers while the teachers are working for the certificate examinations. In 2018/2019, teachers were involved in the delivery of examinations for 6,104 days, an average of almost 8.5 days per school. The impact on each school is dependent on the number of teachers involved.

Many schools face challenges in releasing teachers to become involved in the delivery of examinations due to the difficulties in sourcing qualified substitute teachers. This can, in turn, create challenges for the continuity of learning for students.

The cancellation of oral examinations and other practical components in 2020, due to COVID-19 concerns, brought into sharp focus the importance of such components in assessing a wider range of skills. In 2021, oral and other practical examinations were held outside of normal school time and were facilitated by teachers appointed locally by schools and remunerated by the SEC. The flexibility shown by teachers in facilitating these exams led to very successful outcomes for students who were facilitated in demonstrating a broad range of skills without an unnecessary impact on tuition time. The possibility of continuing with such a model in future years is worth considering, both for the cost effectiveness of the arrangement and, importantly, in terms of benefit for students.

1.6.4 RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION

A range of actions is being implemented to meet teacher supply challenges

To address the challenge of teacher supply in primary and post-primary schools, the Department established a Teacher Supply Steering Group in March 2018. This group, under the chairmanship of the Secretary General of the Department, examined the root causes of the shortage in detail and developed a programme of actions to address issues of teacher supply. An Implementation Group supports the work of the Steering Group.

The work on teacher supply led to the publication, in November 2018, of the _Teacher Supply Action Plan_, which contains a range of actions in four policy areas:

- Data and research to support teacher supply planning

- Policies and arrangements for schools and teachers that impact on teacher mobility/supply

- Higher Education: policy, provision, funding and support

- Communications and promotion of the teaching profession, including the development of a portal for teacher substitution

In late 2018, the _Teaching Transforms_ campaign was launched to promote the teaching profession and to encourage applications to initial teacher education programmes, using digital, radio and video media. The campaign is ongoing and is supported by a dedicated webpage. Other key actions completed under the plan include the publication, in November 2019, of the _Developing a Teacher Demand and Supply Model for Ireland 2020-2036: A Technical Report_, which projects teacher demand and supply to 2036.

In the higher education sector, a number of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) commenced new post-primary initial teacher education programmes in 2019 and 2020 in priority subject areas, and programmes to upskill registered post-primary teachers in Spanish, Mathematics and Physics. Other actions included the launch, in December 2019, by the Irish Primary Principals Network (IPPN) and the National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals (NAPD) of _Sub Seeker_, a portal to match teachers with substitute vacancies. In 2019/20, the Department also piloted a Substitute Teacher Supply Panel Scheme for primary schools; this was expanded nationwide for the 2020/21 school year.

The Department and the Teaching Council implemented a range of measures to increase the supply of available teachers for the re-opening of schools in September 2020

The Department implemented a range of exceptional measures to increase the supply of teachers at both primary and post-primary level for the 2020/21 academic year, when schools reopened following the COVID-19 closure of schools in spring 2020. These measures included offering additional hours to the 2,800 teachers who were working part-time in post-primary schools, allowing job-sharing teachers to work additional hours, and making it more attractive for teachers on career break to provide substitution and supervision cover. The Teaching Council also implemented measures to increase the supply of registered teachers who could be available to fill posts, including making contact with the 6,000 registered teachers who were not currently active in schools. The IPPN also ran a campaign to encourage registration with the portal. Following this, over 5,000 teachers had registered with _Sub Seeker_ by November 2020, compared to approximately 1,800 in March 2020. These interventions allowed schools to hire additional teachers more easily and were critical in keeping them open. However, the lack of availability of substitute teachers still remained a challenge during the pandemic; this was a particular finding from the Inspectorate research conducted during the September-December 2020 term, and indeed continued to be an issue into 2021.

1.7. THE TEACHING PROFESSION

1.7.1 DEVELOPMENT OF THE TEACHING WORKFORCE

Ireland's commitment to a highly skilled teaching force continued

The quality of Ireland's teaching force has been widely acknowledged as a key strength in our education system for many years, and Irish teachers are highly regarded in education systems abroad. Investing in initial and continuing teacher education for teachers and educators at all levels is essential if teaching standards are to be maintained and improved to meet the new and evolving needs of children and young people. It is heartening to note that during the 2016-2020 period, national policies and initiatives have continued to seek to strengthen the professional education and standing of teachers and early years educators.

For primary and post-primary teachers, progress was made on the implementation of measures across all three phases of teacher education: initial, induction and in-career. The implementation of the 2012 report[41] of an International Review Panel on initial teacher education, chaired by Professor Pasi Sahlberg was reviewed. Newly qualified teachers benefited from a new induction programme, _Droichead_, which was introduced in 2013. The professional development needs of serving teachers were addressed through the provision of dedicated support for school leaders, national in-service for curriculum and policy reform, and ongoing support for teachers. Finally, the Teaching Council made considerable progress on a range of initiatives including actions related to teachers' learning and standards for teachers' education.

1.7.2 INITIAL TEACHER EDUCATION

Progress was achieved on restructuring initial teacher education

Initial teacher education (ITE) for primary and post-primary teachers generally follows one of two main models: the concurrent model, where practical and pedagogical training are studied alongside disciplinary studies, or the consecutive model, where practical and pedagogical training follow the disciplinary studies. In addition, a number of 'hybrid models' are available for post-primary teachers. Concurrent programmes are four-year, full-time courses, leading to a Bachelor of Education degree. Consecutive programmes are of two years duration and lead to the award of a Professional Master of Education (PME).

In 2012, the _Report of the International Review Panel on the Structure of Initial Teacher Education Provision in Ireland_, had proposed a vision for the restructuring of ITE provision so that by 2030, Ireland would have a network of teacher education institutions based on a small number of internationally comparable institutes of teacher education. It was envisaged that each of these institutes would offer research-based teacher education in internationally inspiring environments. The report recommended that the then nineteen separate ITE institutions be reconfigured to provide six new institutes or centres for teacher education.

An evaluation of progress was conducted in May 2018 by Professor Sahlberg. The resulting report[42] outlined the significant progress made in the implementation of the structural reforms identified in the 2012 report. Of particular relevance to the period covered by this report was the progress made in consolidating the nineteen discrete ITE providers into centres of excellence as part of an incorporation process. This development has the potential to enhance the quality of research-based teacher education.

---

41 Department of Education and Skills (2012) Report of the International Review Panel on the Structure of Initial Teacher Education Provision in Ireland. Available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/0ef415-report-of-the-international-review-panel-on-the-structure-of-initial/

42 Higher Education Authority (2019) Structure of Teacher Education in Ireland Review of Progress in Implementing Reform. Available at: https://hea.ie/resources/publications/the-structure-of-teacher-education-in-ireland-review-of-progress-in-implementing-reform/

All ITE programmes that lead to registration must have professional accreditation from the Teaching Council. The first cycle of review and accreditation began in 2011 and continued during the period to which this report refers. Between September 2016 and December 2020, the Teaching Council accredited eight ITE programmes. On 11 November 2020, the Teaching Council launched revised standards for programmes of ITE for primary teachers and post-primary teachers respectively in *Céim: Standards for Initial Teacher Education* and revised *Teaching Council Curricular Subject Registration Requirements* (Post-Primary)[43].

To help ensure an adequate supply of irish-medium teachers, two new irish-medium teacher education programmes were launched

In March 2018, the then Minister for Education and Skills announced the establishment of two new Irish-medium teacher education programmes. The new programmes were intended to deliver up to sixty new places for teacher education through Irish annually. This announcement fulfilled a key commitment in the *Policy on Gaeltacht Education 2017-2022*. The creation of these programmes represented a key measure in ensuring that Irish-medium schools in both Gaeltacht and non-Gaeltacht areas had an adequate supply of Irish-medium teachers.

Two important steps were taken in fulfilling this commitment. In September 2018, Mary Immaculate College commenced a part-time blended learning Masters programme (M.Ed.) in Irish-medium and Gaeltacht education for primary and post-primary teachers and principals, with up to thirty places funded annually on the programme. The following year saw the commencement of a four-year Bachelor of Education initial teacher education programme through the medium of Irish, in Marino Institute of Education, with up to thirty places funded on the programme annually. This constitutes the first ever initial teacher education programme at primary level in the whole of Ireland that is entirely through the medium of Irish.

Steps were taken to increase diversity in the teaching profession

Throughout the period to which this Chief Inspector's Report refers, there has been a growing awareness of the need to increase diversity in the teaching profession. In April 2017, the then Minister for Education and Skills announced the allocation of €2.4 million for new initiatives to widen access to ITE. These initiatives were intended to result in more than 120 new teachers entering the teaching profession from disadvantaged groups that, traditionally, have been under-represented in teaching. As a result, a foundation course for ITE, which prepares students from under-represented groups for entry to teaching degrees, was established in NUI Maynooth University. In November 2018, the Bridging Programme for Immigrant Internationally Educated Teachers in the Marino Institute for Education was launched. The Bridging Programme forms one component of the Migrant Teacher Project, which is run by the Marino Institute for Education and funded by the Department of Justice and Equality through the Office for the Promotion of Migrant Integration (OPMI). The Migrant Teacher Project aims to address the issue of the under-representation of migrants in the teaching profession in Ireland. More specifically, the Bridging Programme has been developed for migrant teachers who have been educated and trained outside of Ireland.

---

43 All new primary and post-primary programmes submitted to the Council for accreditation must now be in alignment with Céim. Existing programmes of ITE will be realigned in accordance with Céim for commencement in September 2022 for first year student teachers.

1.7.3 INDUCTION

Droichead became the route of induction for all newly-qualified teachers

Droichead, one of the most significant developments in the early professional development of teachers in recent years, reached a significant milestone in the 2019/20 school year. The _Droichead_ process, which was introduced by the Teaching Council in 2013, is designed to provide whole-school support for teacher induction at both primary and post-primary level. It replaced the inspection-based probationary process that had been part of the landscape of primary teachers' careers for many years. _Droichead_ includes school-based and additional professional learning activities to address the needs of teachers as they begin their careers. The process also enables the principal and teacher colleagues to engage with newly qualified teachers (NQTs) to support reflection on the NQT's emerging professional practice.

During the period to which this report refers, _Droichead_ was confirmed as the route of induction for all primary and post-primary NQTs and so the 2019/20 school year saw the ending of inspectors' involvement in probationary inspections at primary level. This full implementation of professionally-led regulation within the Irish school system positions school communities in a space where shared professional responsibility is now the norm.[44]

1.7.4 CONTINUING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

A number of support services provided continuing professional development programmes for primary and post-primary teachers and school leaders

The Teacher Education Section of the Department funds continuing professional development (CPD) programmes for primary and post-primary teachers. These programmes are designed and delivered by four separate support services. These are the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST), Junior Cycle for Teachers (JCT), Centre for School Leadership (CSL) and National Induction Programme for Teachers (NIPT). At the time of writing, developments are underway which will see the gradual merging of these four support bodies into one support service for schools. In addition to these support bodies, the National Council for Special Education provides customised SEN-related CPD, advice and support to primary and post-primary levels and An Chomhairle Um Oideachas Gaeltachta (COGG) provides customised CPD support to teachers in Irish-medium schools in English speaking areas and in the Gaeltacht. The National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS), a section of the Department, also delivers national CPD programmes and CPD bespoke to individual schools as part of its provision of applied psychology services for teachers and school communities.

To promote the continuing professional development of teachers and educational partners, there is a national network of twenty-one full-time and seven part-time Education Support Centres. These are constituted under _Section 37 of the Education Act (1998)_. The principal activity of these centres is to organise the local delivery of national programmes of teacher professional development and to support the local CPD needs of teachers and the wider school community in their region. In addition, three centres provide the administrative headquarters for four Department-funded CPD support services for teachers (PDST, JCT, NIPT and CSL).

---

44 _The Teaching Council (2013) Droichead: Teaching Council policy on a new model of induction and probation for newly qualified teachers, following consultation with stakeholders. Available at: https://www.teachingcouncil.ie/en/Publications/Teacher-Education/Droichead-Policy-on-Induction-and-Probation.pdf_

Figure 1.5 Key providers of CPD programmes

Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST)

The PDST provides support to primary and post-primary teachers and school leaders in a range of pedagogical, curricular and educational areas. It supports teachers as reflective practitioners by providing a range of professional development opportunities and supports that enable teacher learning, collaboration and evidence-based practice with an emphasis on:

- curriculum and pedagogy
- learning and teaching methodologies
- school improvement and school self-evaluation
- school leadership, culture and leading learning
- pupil/student and teacher wellbeing
- information and communications technology.

Junior Cycle for Teachers (JCT)

The JCT service continues to deliver a comprehensive professional development programme to support teachers of Junior Cycle. This includes seminars for school leaders, whole-staff workshops in schools, subject-specific workshops via school clustering, events hosted in education centres and school visits.

Centre for School Leadership (CSL)

The Centre for School Leadership (CSL) is a partnership between the Department, the Irish Primary Principals' Network (IPPN), and the National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals (NAPD). It was established in September 2015 with a role in leading, supporting, enhancing and advising on high-quality programmes (Mentoring, Coaching & Aspiring Leaders) to develop and support school leadership, particularly principals, across the primary and post-primary school network.

National Induction Programme for Teachers (NIPT)

The NIPT supports the induction of newly qualified teachers (NQTs), both primary and post-primary, into the teaching profession in Ireland. *Droichead* is the integrated professional induction framework for NQTs.

National Council for Special Education (NCSE)

The NCSE is a national provider of SEN-related CPD, advice and support to mainstream and special settings at primary and post-primary levels. It provides a comprehensive programme of Teacher Professional Learning seminars each school year, covering a variety of special educational needs topics. School leaders and teachers can also apply to the NCSE for funding for approved teacher professional learning (TPL) courses.

An Chomhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta agus Gaelscolaíochta (COGG)

As part of its provision of support services to Irish-medium primary and post-primary schools, COGG provides a range of CPD events for teachers teaching in these contexts. These CPD events include intensive Irish language courses across a range of subjects for teachers working in Gaeltacht schools and Irish-medium schools outside the Gaeltacht. From 2017, the COGG team has provided additional targeted CPD support for schools participating in the Gaeltacht School Recognition Scheme to support the implementation of immersion education.

The National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS)

NEPS delivers national CPD programmes and bespoke supports for individual schools as part of the provision of applied psychology services for teachers and school communities to build and maximise their capacity to respond to the needs of all students and those with particular needs. These professional learning activities may include the provision of training/formal professional learning opportunities including training in the delivery of evidence-informed approaches and early intervention, and working with school communities to develop supportive school structures and processes. They may also include the facilitation of service planning and review meetings with schools, including group planning meetings, and individual school planning and review meetings.

Supporting the implementation of national policies was a key focus for teachers' continuing professional development

Professional development support for the implementation of the relevant actions in the Literacy and Numeracy Strategy, in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM), DEIS, Languages Connect, Health and Wellbeing, and Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) and digital technologies has been prioritised since 2016. DEIS schools continued to be prioritised by all support services across all areas, including DEIS-specific literacy and numeracy programmes, the Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP) and cross-sectoral cluster projects.

From 2016 to 2020, CPD for primary and post-primary teachers was provided in a wide range of subject areas. These included support for the introduction and implementation of the Primary Language Curriculum (PLC), new subject specifications under the Framework for Junior Cycle, and both new and revised subject specifications at Leaving Certificate; new examinable subjects at Leaving Certificate include Politics and Society, Computer Science and Physical Education. In 2020, funding for over 600 places was made available on college-based post-graduate programmes in Leadership and Special Educational Needs.

Schools may apply to the PDST for general school support. However, the provision of such support is subject to team capacity and available resources at any one time. The decline in primary school supports in 2019-20 is a result of a shift to seminars relating to the PLC rollout. The number of primary schools receiving information and communication technology (ICT) support has increased considerably over the period to which this report refers (Table 1.20).
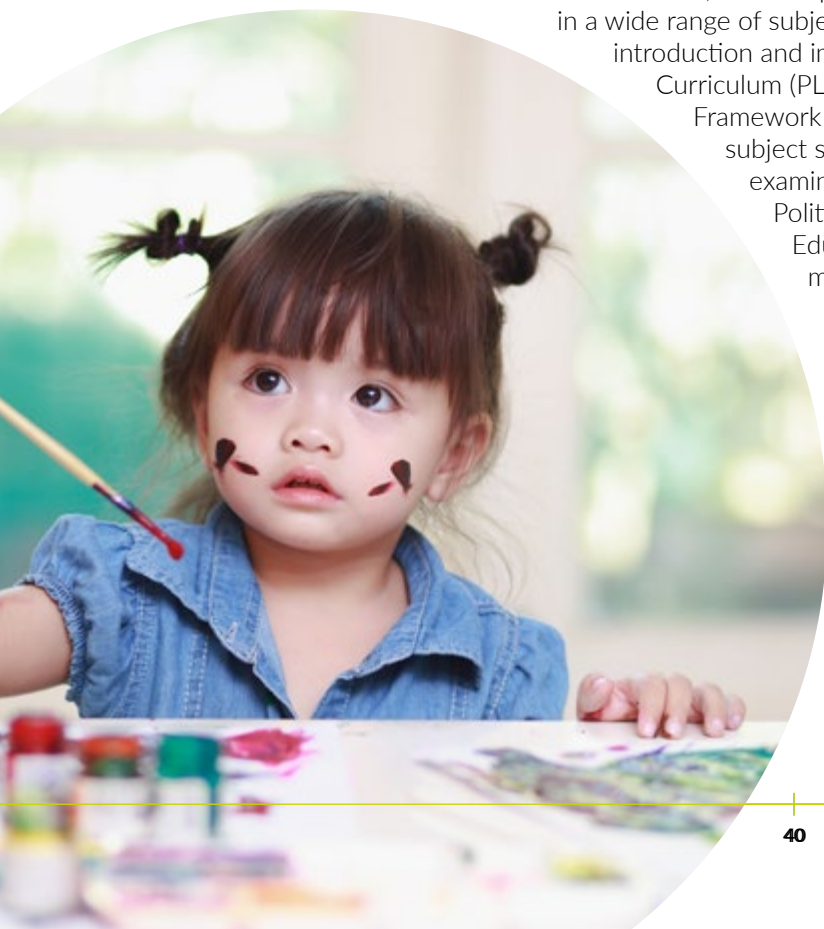
Table 1.20: School support provided by the PDST 2016-2020

Indicator	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Number of primary schools receiving school support	1,288	1,574	1,931	1,469	1,009
Number of hours provided to primary schools receiving school support	12,395	14,849	23,686	13,812	8,436
Number of primary schools receiving ICT school support	71	110	182	373	334
Number of ICT hours provided to primary schools receiving school support	566	1,505	1,537	2,555	2,385
Number of post-primary schools receiving school support	288	307	416	463	346

Source: Statistics Section, Department of Education. Also see Education Indicators for Ireland 2021 at: https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/055810-education-statistics/#latest-statistical-reports

There have been exceptional requirements for schools to engage in continuing professional development during school time

At primary and post-primary levels, due to the introduction and implementation of new curricula, there have been exceptional requirements for schools to engage in continuing professional development (CPD) during school time. Over the 2016/17, 2017/18, 2018/19 and 2019/20 school years, primary teachers availed of 104,588 CPD days in total, approximately 2.5 days per teacher, related to the implementation of the Primary Language Curriculum (Table 1.21). The corresponding figure for post-primary teachers is 54,423 days, approximately 1.75 days per teacher, of which 18,933 days were allocated to Junior Cycle CPD. In effect, the attendance of teachers at CPD events related to curriculum reform has reduced the teaching time for pupils/students. While schools are entitled to use substitute cover for these absences, substitute teachers may not be available because of the shortage of substitute teachers in the subject. In some instances, the school may close. It raises an argument for the inclusion of non-teaching days for the purpose of attendance at CPD in teachers' contracts, thus ensuring that teachers can avail of valuable opportunities to attend CPD while the learning of their pupils/students is not disrupted.

Table 1.21: Number of CPD Days engaged in by teachers 2016-2020

Year	Primary CPD days	Post-primary CPD days		Total
		Junior Cycle	Other	
2016/2017	22,266	884	7,027	**30,177**
2017/2018	29,376	2,537	8,027	**39,940**
2018/2019	30,577	7,790	10,679	**49,046**
2018/2019	22,369	7,722	9,757	**39,848**
TOTAL	**104,588**	**18,933**	**35,490**	**159,011**
			54,423	

Source: Department of Education

Engagement by teachers in additional continuing professional development is optional

There is no official requirement for teachers to engage in additional professional development. Individual primary and post-primary teachers may participate in elective CPD if they wish. If this CPD takes place during school time, approval for attendance is at the discretion of the school's board of management. No information on the amount of time spent by individual teachers on this type of CPD is available centrally. During the summer holidays, many primary teachers engage in CPD organised by a range of course providers. In return, these teachers are able to avail of three to five Extra Personal Vacation (EPV) days during the school year. A total of 53,123 primary teachers who attended summer courses were eligible to avail of EPV days in the school year 2019/2020. Paid substitute cover is not generally provided for EPV days so, if the days are taken, some disruption may occur in children's learning. However, as part of the suite of operational supports provided to schools during the COVID-19 pandemic, for the 2020/21 school year, the Department and Education and Training Boards (ETB) provided substitute cover for the first day of EPV-leave taken by a teacher in the school year.

Teachers' involvement in continuing professional development impacts on instruction time

It should be noted that schools are operating under considerable constraints when it comes to staff availing of CPD opportunities. Releasing teachers during school time has implications for continuity of learning and, in some parts of the country, there are considerable issues with regard to the availability of substitute teachers. Despite the many benefits that accrue from teachers' participation in CPD, teacher absence from school, even short-term absences, can result in a loss of learning for pupils/students. At primary level, EPV-related teacher absences can have a significant organisational impact on a school which can, in turn, impact negatively on continuity of provision for pupils. In light of school closures as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, it will be important to minimise the impact that attendance at CPD has on learners' class contact time.

1.7.5 PROMOTING PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS IN TEACHING

The Teaching Council's *Cosán* framework for recognising and promoting teachers' ongoing professional learning was published

The first national framework for teachers' learning, _Cosán_, was approved and published in March 2016. _Cosán_ forms part of an overall framework of standards for all stages of teachers' learning, including ITE and induction (*Droichead*). These standards have been designed to reassure both the profession and the wider public that teachers' learning is of high quality and is able to adapt and respond to learners' evolving needs.

Cosán acknowledges, encourages and promotes teachers' learning, and fosters public recognition of their commitment to learning. In April 2016, the Teaching Council commenced a development process for _Cosán_ and this is currently ongoing. This phase is allowing for different approaches to be explored, trialled and adapted in different contexts. When embedded, _Cosán_ will be an even more important feature of the professional rubric for teachers.

Public hearings into teachers' fitness-to-teach commenced

The work of the Teaching Council reached a significant milestone in July 2016, when the then Minister for Education and Skills commenced the Fitness-to-Teach provisions of the _Teaching Council Acts 2001-2015_. The first ever public hearing into a teacher's Fitness-to-Teach was heard over two days in November 2017. Up to the end of 2020, 185 complaints were made to the Teaching Council. Forty-one of these complaints were under investigation by the Council at the end of 2020. By the end of 2020, five Fitness-to-Teach hearings had taken place and seven Fitness-to-Teach inquiries were awaiting hearing.

1.8. THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Rapid policy responses were needed during the initial period of school closures and to support the re-opening of schools during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the closure of schools posed some of the greatest logistical and educational challenges that the education sector had ever experienced. A range of policy responses and actions had to be developed and implemented in a short period of time, and these responses had to be adjusted rapidly as the pandemic evolved. It is noteworthy that all of the education partners, including representatives of students, parents, principals/managers, school leaders and teachers/practitioners, were involved closely in the development and implementation of these policy initiatives.

In 2020, there was unprecedented expenditure to enable the safe reopening and operation of schools and other learning settings

In 2020, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic presented additional challenges, and a very considerable package of additional funding and other supports were provided to assist in the safe re-opening and operation of schools (Table 1.22). The €331 million provided for the re-opening of schools comprised a capital allocation of €180 million and €151 million in current funding. This funding facilitated preparatory works to sustain re-opening, the replacement of teachers and non-teaching staff unable to attend for work due to COVID-19, additional release days for principals and deputy principals at primary level, wellbeing supports, school transport costs, personal protective equipment (PPE) and enhanced cleaning regimes. The funding also included a grant to support ICT requirements for remote teaching, including essential learning platforms and other ICT infrastructure and additional minor works grants for primary and post-primary schools. Through the 2020 Summer Provision Programme, additional funding was made available to enable schools to provide further learning experiences for children with complex special needs and students at most risk of disadvantage in DEIS post-primary schools.

Table 1.22: Allocated funding associated with the Roadmap for the Reopening of Schools for the period August to December 2020 (€m)

Support Type	Purpose	Total Allocated (€m)
Targeted supports in advance of reopening	to facilitate preparatory works to be completed in schools for reopening including: • refurbishments/reconfigurations of school spaces • set-up of hand sanitising stations • signage	€79
Supports to sustain reopening	to fund: • additional teachers in schools • replacement of teachers and non-teaching staff unable to attend work due to COVID-19 • additional release days for teaching principals and deputy principals to implement COVID-19 measures • enhanced cleaning regimes • PPE equipment	€126
Other costs to allow for the safe reopening of schools	to fund: • additional educational psychological services to provide for wellbeing supports for students • additional COVID-19 supports for the transport of pupils on the school transport scheme.	€21
Additional capital allocation	• ICT grant for schools • additional minor works grants for Primary and Post-Primary schools	€105
TOTAL		**€331**

Source: Department of Education

With the support of the Inspectorate, the Department published a range of documents to support schools in mediating the curriculum during the period of school closures from March to June 2020 and on the re-opening of schools in September 2020

In During the period of school closures from March to June 2020, the Department published a suite of documents to support schools in mediating the curriculum. The Inspectorate had a lead role in the preparation of these documents, which included guidance for schools on how to support the learning of children and young people in a remote teaching and learning context. Other material published included guidance for parents, and guidance to support the learning of children and young people with special educational needs, and children and young people at risk of educational disadvantage.

The Department published a further suite of documents between July 2020 and December 2020 to support schools in the safe provision of schooling and the mediation of the curriculum on the return to school in September 2020. The Inspectorate played a key role in the preparation of these documents, notably guidance for schools on remote educational provision for children and young people who could not attend school in person because they were at very high risk of contracting COVID-19, guidance on the delivery of practical subjects safely in the context of COVID-19, and guidance for supporting children and young people with special educational needs and those at risk of educational disadvantage.

Contingency guidance documents in relation to supporting remote teaching and learning in the event of a further period of full or partial school closures were also published. The guidance documents published by the Department were informed by information gathered by the Inspectorate during its research and ongoing engagement with schools during 2020.

The replacement of the Leaving Certificate with a system of calculated grades required extensive collaboration among all education stakeholders

One of the most obvious policy challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic was the assessment and certification of students' learning at the end of Senior Cycle. An intensive period of collaborative working involving the Department, all education stakeholders, the State Examinations Commission, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) and the Inspectorate, led to the decision to cancel State examinations in 2020 and the establishment of a system of Calculated Grades through which students could obtain Leaving Certificate results. Schools and teachers collaborated with a specially established Calculated Grades Executive Office in the Department to provide students with end-of-schooling certification. The students concerned were able to progress to higher and further education and the world of work in autumn 2020. Inspectors were deeply involved with the development and delivery of the Calculated Grades process.

Research carried out by the Inspectorate and by other agencies and academic institutions on the experience of children and young people in schools during the COVID-19 pandemic informed the Department's policy responses and supports provided to schools and learners

There was significant concern about learning loss caused by the disruption to in-school teaching and learning during the pandemic. The Inspectorate's work with schools provided much evidence on the challenges that young people and their schools were experiencing during the pandemic and this was published in a series of reports in 2020 and 2021 (Further information on the findings of this research is available in Chapter 10). Several research studies from different agencies and academics also appeared on various aspects of the impact of COVID-19 on learning. In July 2020, for example, the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) published a report[45], produced in partnership with the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (previously the Department of Children and Youth Affairs) that drew on Irish and international research on the effects of the pandemic restrictions on children and young people. The findings indicated that the disruption to learning was likely to have long-term consequences for many, especially for more disadvantaged children and young people. To help mitigate the challenges experienced by pupils/students with special educational needs and those at risk of educational disadvantage, the Department established a range of specific summer programmes in mainstream and special schools; these provided children with an opportunity to continue or re-engage with learning, at school or at home.

The Inspectorate adapted the ways in which it interacted with schools and settings during the COVID-19 pandemic

In response to the pandemic in 2020, the Inspectorate adapted the ways in which it interacted with settings and schools, and how it supported them in an extremely challenging and changing context. New approaches to monitoring the quality of the experiences of children and young people, both at home and in schools were developed and implemented. Information gathered from interactions with schools informed policy-making in the Department and supported the provision of guidance to schools on how to operate safely and continue to mediate the curriculum. The Inspectorate played a key role in putting in place and implementing alternative systems to the State examinations in 2020 (and in 2021). The Inspectorate also supported Health Service Executive teams in following-up with schools where cases of COVID-19 had been reported. Further information on the work of the Inspectorate during the pandemic in 2020 is provided in Chapter 10 of this report.

---

45 *Darmody, M., Smyth E. and Russell, H. (2020) The implications of the COVID-19 pandemic for policy in relation to children and young people: a research review. Available at: https://www.esri.ie/publications/the-implications-of-the-covid-19-pandemic-for-policy-in-relation-to-children-and-young*

Significant supports were developed by the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) to support wellbeing in schools

Cognisant of the negative effects of the pandemic on wellbeing, psychologists of the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) developed advice and resources for parents, students and school staff to support their wellbeing during school closures from March to June 2020 and at the start of the 2020/2021 school year when schools re-opened. NEPS and the Department, in collaboration with the Department of Health and the HSE, set up a dedicated webpage with information and links to supports available for Leaving Certificate students. In addition to the publication of resources, NEPS staff were also available to consult with school staff and/or parents/guardians and young people as requested. This engagement was facilitated online when schools were closed.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Professional Development Service for Teachers adapted its modes of support for schools and there were very high levels of engagement by teachers and school leaders

During 2020, the PDST and the other support services adapted their modes of provision to allow for remote teaching and distance learning throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. At the outset of the school closures, the PDST launched a _Distance Learning_ page for teachers and school leaders. To facilitate teachers in planning and preparing lessons and for remote instruction, the PDST teams developed a range of Learning Paths for all primary and post-primary subjects on _www.Scoilnet.ie_. They also provided a broad range of distance learning resources, including digital technology resources, to assist teachers and school leaders in continuing with the teaching, learning and assessment of pupils and students.

The PDST transferred planned face-to-face CPD to online formats and provided individual school support through remote models, prioritising the continuation of supports for newly-appointed school leaders and teachers of new Leaving Certificate subjects and specifications (Computer Science, Physical Education Economics, Agricultural Science, Leaving Certificate Applied and Art).

The support provided by the PDST was welcomed by schools and there were very high levels of engagement by school leaders and teachers. Between 12 March 2020 and 30 June 2020, the PDST recorded 8,790 teacher/school leader interactions through school support and live online course engagement. In addition, 3001 teachers and school leaders engaged in _Teaching Online for Primary and Post-primary Teachers_ and there were 10,716 teacher engagements with the PDST webinars[46].

In conjunction with the Teaching Council, the PDST also broadcasted weekly live webinars as part of their _Learning4All Series_. These webinars, which were moderated by the Teaching Council, included panel representation from the PDST, teachers, school leaders, parents, students and key education partners. Over 17,000 engagements were recorded for the ten webinars that took place between March and June 2020.

---

46 This figure does not include those engagements with teachers carried out by the PDST in partnership with the Teaching Council

1.8 Key messages

Learners

- During the period September 2016 – December 2020, Irish schools and early learning and care (ELC) settings served a growing number of children and young people overall; a peak has now been reached in the primary sector, but further growth is expected to occur in the post-primary sector until 2026.

- The success of the ECCE programme in the early learning and care sector has had a notable impact on the age at which children start primary school. The consequent impact that this will have on the revision of the primary curriculum, particularly for junior classes, and in the long term on curriculum choices and programmes at Senior Cycle, including provision for vocational educational and training, will need to be considered.

- The active inclusion of student voice in policy-making has been a notable change in educational policy development.

- Pupils at primary level experienced the roll-out of a revised PLC, and all first-year students entering post-primary school in 2019/20 were studying the full suite of revised subject specifications introduced as part of Junior Cycle reforms.

Funding

- Funding for the early learning and care (ELC) sector grew significantly in the 2016-2020 period. _First 5_ commits to reaching funding levels of approximately €1 billion by 2028.

- Expenditure per learner at primary and post-primary levels is in line with OECD averages.

- Investment in the DEIS scheme has continued to rise; from €110m to €125m.

- Significant growth has occurred in expenditure to support learners with special educational needs from just over €1.5 billion to just over €2 billion.

Teachers and early years educators

- The numbers of early years educators and teachers have grown. Most of the growth in teacher numbers is accounted for by the demographic growth in student numbers and increased provision for children with special educational needs.

- Despite growing numbers of early years educators and teachers in the system, recruitment and staff retention remain a challenge at all levels.

- A range of actions is being implemented to increase diversity in the teaching profession and to meet teacher supply challenges.

Investing in a high quality teaching workforce

- National policies and initiatives have continued to seek to strengthen the professional education and standing of teachers and early years educators.

- The Government's _First 5_ policy https://first5.gov.ie/ has set out a highly ambitious vision for a graduate-led workforce of 50% of early years educators by 2028. Important initial steps have been taken to achieve this goal, with publication of _Nurturing Skills_ in 2021. Progress has been made in the implementation of reforms in initial teacher education for primary and post-primary teachers, and new teacher education programmes have been established for the Gaeltacht and Irish-medium education sector.

- There has been considerable investment in continuing professional development for early years

educators and teachers.

- The Teaching Council's induction programme, *Droichead*, became available for all newly qualified teachers, replacing the inspection-based probationary process that had been in place for many years.

- While the key focus of CPD is on the implementation of national policies, the support services are providing increased levels of bespoke school-based CPD.

- Classroom teaching time in Ireland, while greater than the OECD average, is impacted by teachers' involvement in CPD and the delivery of examinations.

- The Teaching Council advanced several measures relating to the professionalism of teachers, including an induction programme for all newly qualified teachers, the publication of a framework for recognising and promoting teachers' ongoing professional learning, and the holding of Fitness-to-Teach hearings.

Educational policy

- The Department of Education's *Action Plan for Education 2016-2019* set the overall policy framework for the development of the Irish educational system for the period. *First 5* *(2019-2028)* set the overall policy framework for ELC.

- The Department of Education launched a range of national initiatives for schools and placed considerable emphasis on Gaeltacht education, STEM education, creativity, digital technologies, education for sustainable development, and wellbeing.

- The introduction of these key strategies addressed several areas where curricular development was needed. However, the simultaneous implementation of a number of strategies in a relatively short period of time posed challenges for schools.

COVID-19 pandemic

- Rapid policy and funding responses were required to assist schools and other education settings to address the needs of students during the COVID-19 pandemic.

- Schools and settings had to make very significant changes to their provision and their environments in a rapidly changing environment.

2
The Inspectorate
and Inspection

2.1. INTRODUCTION

The Inspectorate works to improve the quality of learning and teaching that children and young people experience in Irish schools, centres for education and other settings, and to support the development of the Irish educational system. We do this through providing high-quality evaluation, analysis, support and advice in relation to educational provision, mainly at early years, primary and post-primary levels.

The _Education Act 1998_ sets out in Section 13 the statutory functions of the Inspectorate. Our work is also shaped by the principles and commitments set out in the _Code of Practice for the Inspectorate_. Essentially, these relate to:

- Keeping the quality of the education provision for children and young people at the heart of what we do
- Promoting ongoing development and improvement of education provision from early years through to Senior Cycle
- Respectful engagement with all in the course of our work
- Promoting responsibility and accountability in all education settings that we evaluate, including settings that support children and young people with special educational needs.

We endeavour to bring about improvement in the learning experiences and learning outcomes of all children and young people through the advice and support we give to teachers, early years educators, school and pre-school leaders. We also strive to promote improvement and the sharing of good practice through our communications, publications, guidance and advice. Through our direct engagement with settings and schools, and through the provision of evidence and advice to inform policy and practice, we seek to build the capacity of settings and schools to become self-improving learning organisations.

In addition to our advisory and support roles, we provide an assurance of quality and public accountability in the education system through, for example, reporting back to schools and parents and the whole school/pre-school community on the outcomes of our inspections. This accountability dimension of our function helps to assure trust in the education system. The improvement and accountability functions of the Inspectorate are interconnected functions of inspection.

The inspections that we carry out in early learning and care (ELC) settings focus specifically on the educational dimensions of ELC provision and are intended to complement the regulatory inspections of settings conducted by the Tusla Early Years Inspectorate, the independent statutory regulator for the sector. Over the period 2016 to 2020, our inspections were confined to the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme. While the two inspectorates operate independently under separate frameworks, they collaborate with one another where possible, including through formal structures

Context

15 Early Years inspectors

58 Primary inspectors

50 Post-primary inspectors

Looking at our School 2016 informs the work of the Inspectorate

Inspections and reports

2,443 inspections in Early Learning and Care settings

92 Child Protection and Safeguarding Inspections (CPSIs)

2,293 SSE advisory visits

526 advisory visits for the Gaeltacht School Recognition Scheme

3,511 inspections in primary and special schools

7,735 probationary visits in primary and special schools

2,759 inspections in post-primary schools and centres for education

1,094 follow-through inspections
- Good or very good progress on 81% of recommendations in primary, special and post-primary schools

Publication of thematic reports on Modern Foreign Learning, Digital Learning, STEM and on provision for children with Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

Key messages: Developing how the Inspectorate works

We introduced a broader range of inspection models
- Greater inspection coverage of schools and settings
- More focussed evaluation

We developed how we evaluate ELC settings
- Modified the Early Years Education Inspection Model
- Introduced Follow-through Inspections
- Commenced work on a model to evaluate provision for children from birth to six years

We introduced new models of inspection to evaluate SEN provision

We expanded our advisory role in schools

We are improving how we engage with learners during inspection

We continued to support curriculum change and development across all sectors

established and run by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY), for example, the Operations and Systems Alignment Group (OSAG).

This chapter describes the organisation of the Inspectorate and outlines some of the key developments in how we carry out our inspection work in schools, ELC settings and other education settings. It also presents data in relation to the scope of the inspection, research and advisory work completed over the period September 2016 to December 2020, and looks at how we monitor improvement in schools and settings, and within the Inspectorate itself. The work that we are doing to develop how we incorporate the perspectives of parents and students in our inspections is commented on extensively in Chapter 8.

2.2. STAFFING AND ORGANISATION OF THE INSPECTORATE

The Inspectorate is divided into nine business units, and is led by the Chief Inspector and a senior management team. Five regionally-based units, each led by an assistant chief inspector, are responsible for planning and undertaking the core programme of inspections and advisory visits to primary and post-primary schools. The majority of inspectors are assigned on either a full-time or part-time basis to these units.

A sixth business unit, led by an assistant chief inspector, is responsible for early years education inspections. These are carried out in ELC settings that participate in the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Programme. These inspections are undertaken on behalf of the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) in line with a Memorandum of Understanding between the DCEDIY and the Department of Education and the Inspectorate.

In addition, assistant chief inspectors in the five regional units and in the Early Years business unit are responsible for aspects of the policy development and advisory work of the Inspectorate. The Inspectorate's Early Years unit also provides specialist support for early years policy units in the Department of Education and the DCEDIY.

Although all business units function in close co-operation with other divisions of the Department across areas such as policy development and implementation, three of the Inspectorate's business units, each of which is led by an assistant chief inspector, have specific policy support responsibilities. These comprise a range of areas including teacher education, early years education, inclusion, Irish in the school system, curriculum and assessment policy, and school improvement. Some policy responsibilities, as well as responsibility for the implementation of Department operational policies in the Inspectorate, lie with regional assistant chief inspectors. For example, data protection, as it relates to the work of the Inspectorate, is currently led by a regional assistant chief inspector.

Chart 2.1: Inspectorate Organisational Structure

Chief Inspector

Deputy Chief Inspector

Deputy Chief Inspector

Assistant Chief Inspector

Business Unit 1:
North and Dublin North Region

Assistant Chief Inspector

Business Unit 2:
South East and Dublin South Region & Secretariat

Assistant Chief Inspector

Business Unit 3:
Midlands and Dublin West Region

Assistant Chief Inspector

Business Unit 4:
South Region

Assistant Chief Inspector

Business Unit 5:
West and Mid-West Region

Assistant Chief Inspector

Business Unit 6:
Evaluation Support and Research Unit

Assistant Chief Inspector

Business Unit 7:
Teacher Education and Inclusion Policy Support Unit

Assistant Chief Inspector

Business Unit 8:
Curriculum & Assessment Policy Support Unit

Assistant Chief Inspector

Business Unit 9:
Early Years Education

Assistant Chief Inspector

An tAonad um Oideachas Gaeltachta

One business unit, the Evaluation Support and Research Unit (ESRU), is responsible for the development and review of the range of inspection models, research, and analysis of inspection data in the Inspectorate. It also provides a range of supports to inspectors assigned to the Inspectorate's regional business units to assist them in planning and undertaking their inspection and advisory work.

During the 2016-2020 period, one assistant chief inspector, with the support of an administrative team and a number of inspectors, managed An tAonad um Oideachas Gaeltachta (The Gaeltacht Education Unit) for the Department. This unit is currently responsible for the implementation of the Department's Policy on Gaeltacht Education, the implementation of the Gaeltacht School Recognition Scheme, and the development of a policy on Irish-medium education outside of Gaeltacht areas.

The administrative work of the Inspectorate is supported by a secretariat.

Table 2.1 outlines the number of inspectors and secretariat staff in service at the end of each calendar year of the period to which this report refers. The numbers are expressed in terms of whole-time equivalents. A comparison with the equivalent data reported in the previous *Chief Inspector's Report, January 2013 – July 2016*,[1] shows that between July 2016 and December 2020, the number of inspectors employed by the Inspectorate had increased by 9.4%. Meanwhile, over the period to which the current Chief Inspector's report refers, there was a notable increase in the number of early years educators[2], primary teachers (8%) and post-primary teachers (17%).

Table 2.1: Number of inspectors and secretariat staff in service September 2016 – December 2020, expressed as whole-time equivalents

	31/12/2016	31/12/2017	31/12/2018	31/12/2019	31/12/2020
Senior Management	11	13[3]	13	13	13
Senior Early Years Inspectors	-	-	-	-	2
Early Years Inspectors	12	12	15	15	13
Primary Inspectors	33	31	27.8	25.8	31
Primary Divisional Inspectors	24.6	26.6	26	27	27
Post-primary Inspectors	27.5	28.5	30.5	29	32
Senior Post-primary Inspectors	24.7	24.7	26	22.6	17.6
Inspectorate Secretariat	9.9	10.1	12.1	12.5	11.9

Source: Inspectorate, Department of Education

1   *Hereafter referred to as the Chief Inspector's Report (2016)*

2   *In 2016/2017, 20,110 early years educators were reported as working directly with children in early learning and care services. In 2019/2020, 26,294 early years educators were reported as working directly with children in early learning and care and in the school-age childcare sector. Sources: Pobal (2017) Early Years Sector Profile 2016/17. Available at: https://www.pobal.ie/research-analysis/early-years/; Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth and Pobal (2021) Annual Early Years Sector Profile Report 2019-2020. Available at: https://www.pobal.ie/reearch-analysis/early-years/.*

3   *One of these positions was assigned outside the Inspectorate to An tAonad um Oideachas Gaeltachta.*

2.3. DEVELOPMENTS IN OUR INSPECTION AND ADVISORY WORK

2.3.1 Inspection frameworks

Our inspections are underpinned by national quality standards

The year 2016 marked the publication, for the first time, of a coherent continuum of quality frameworks to underpin inspection in settings taking part in the ECCE programme, primary schools and post-primary schools. These frameworks, which are described below, set out what quality in the educational dimension of the ECCE programme and schools looks like. They are intended to support self-evaluation, make the inspection frameworks and criteria used by inspectors clear, support consistency in inspections, and promote shared discourse about the quality of aspects of educational provision in settings taking part in the ECCE programme and in schools.

***Looking at our School 2016: A Quality Framework for Schools* informs the work of the Inspectorate in both monitoring and reporting on quality in schools and school self-evaluation**

Looking at Our School 2016: A Quality Framework for Primary Schools (LAOS) and *Looking at Our School 2016: A Quality Framework for Post-Primary Schools (LAOS)* were published in 2016. This was a significant innovation as, unlike previous frameworks, these quality frameworks were designed to inform both inspection and SSE, as well as to promote shared discourse around matters of educational quality. These quality frameworks provided a unified and coherent set of standards for two key dimensions of the work of schools: teaching and learning, and leadership and management. LAOS is used to inform the work of inspectors as they monitor and report on quality in schools. It is also designed for teachers and for school leaders to use in promoting the development and implementation of the most effective and engaging teaching and learning approaches, and in enhancing the quality of leadership in their schools. The frameworks build upon materials that had been developed to support school self-evaluation in 2012, and were published following extensive input from education partners and potential users. The publications were widely welcomed. During the September 2016 to March 2017 period, the Inspectorate delivered a number of awareness-raising events on LAOS to the education partners and to school leaders.

The modified early years education inspection model provides a more holistic and inclusive evaluation framework

Early Years Education Inspections (EYEI) were introduced in April 2016 at the request of the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, to complement the statutory inspections of early learning and care settings that are carried out by Tusla, the Child and Family Agency. The introduction of EYEIs followed extensive planning and development work within the Inspectorate, and widespread consultation with various partners within the early years sector. EYEIs are based on a quality framework that is informed by the principles of *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* and *Síolta: the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education*, as well as on national and international research related to early childhood education and inspection. The quality framework incorporated the key elements of best practice in early education and categorised provision under four broad areas:

- The quality of the context to support children's learning and development

- The quality of the processes to support children's learning and development

- The quality of children's learning experiences and achievements

- The quality of management and leadership for learning.

The Inspectorate conducted a review of the EYEI model in 2017 and, as a result of the findings, some modifications to the model were implemented in 2018. These included broadening the focus of the inspection model to include a more holistic and inclusive evaluation framework. The revised framework[4] identifies twenty key outcomes, under the four broad areas, which describe aspects of best practice in early childhood education. The focus that the framework brought to process quality in early learning and care provision was widely welcomed within the sector.

2.3.2   Developments in how we inspect

Our range of inspection models was broadened to facilitate more targeted evaluation and support

During the period to which this report refers, the Inspectorate used a broad range of inspection models from short unannounced inspections and medium-scale inspections, covering an aspect of the work of schools, to whole-school type inspections (Table 2.2). We also used specific models for inspections of alternative education provision in settings such as Youthreach centres and schools attached to Special Care Units (SCU) and Children Detention Centres (CDC). These inspection models focused mainly on two critical aspects of the work of schools: the effectiveness of school leadership and management and the quality of teaching and learning.

We broadened the range of inspection models to facilitate more targeted evaluation and support in particular contexts. The new models were designed to:

- **follow through on inspections in early learning and care settings**
- **focus in an in-depth way on provision for particular subjects of the** *Primary Curriculum*
- **evaluate provision for children and young people with special educational needs (SEN)**
- **monitor the implementation by schools of the** *Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools 2017*, **and**
- **provide advice and support for the implementation of the Department's guidelines for creating a safe learning and working environment during COVID-19.**

In designing these new inspection approaches and models, we engaged in a collaborative approach with the relevant education stakeholders.

The availability of a responsive suite of models and the deployment of particular inspection models reflects a strategic decision by the Inspectorate to ensure that a balanced, national evaluation programme is delivered using a proportionate, risk-based approach to inspection. This approach has informed inspection planning priorities across all three sectors and has contributed to improved inspection coverage, as well as more customised, risk-informed use of inspection nationally.

---

4   Source: Department of Education (2018) *Guide to Early Years Education Inspections*, June 2018, p.16.
    Available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/68fac2-guide-to-early-years-education-inspections/.

Table 2.2: Range of inspection models

Length/Intensity	Inspections in Early Learning and Care settings	Inspections in Primary Schools and Special Schools	Inspections in Post-Primary Schools	Inspections in other settings
Short inspections (half to one in-school day)		Incidental inspection (typically unannounced)	Incidental inspection (typically unannounced)	Incidental inspection in Centres for Education (typically unannounced)
		Supporting the Safe Provision of Schooling	Supporting the Safe Provision of Schooling	
Medium-scale inspections covering an aspect of the work of the school/setting (typically one or two in-school days)	Early Years Education Inspection (typically announced)	Curriculum evaluation	Subject inspection	Evaluation of Remote Teaching and Learning (carried out remotely)
			Programme evaluation (Transition Year (TY), Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA), Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP))	
		Child Protection and Safeguarding Inspection (Initial and final inspection)(CPSI))	Child Protection and Safeguarding Inspection (Initial and final inspection) (CPSI)	
Whole-school type inspections – team inspections (typically three in-school days)		Whole-School Evaluation: Management, Leadership and Learning (WSE-MLL)	Whole-School Evaluation: Management, Leadership and Learning (WSE-MLL)	Evaluation of Centres for Education Detention Centres
		Evaluation of Action Planning for Improvement in DEIS schools	Evaluation of Action Planning for Improvement in DEIS schools	Inspection of Schools attached to Special Care Units and Children Detention Centres
		Evaluation of provision for pupils with special educational needs*	Evaluation of provision for students with special educational needs	
Follow-up inspections (typically one or two in-school days)	Follow-through inspections	Follow-through inspections	Follow-through inspections	Follow-through inspections
New models in development	Under 3's	Cross-sectoral subject evaluation	Cross-sectoral subject evaluation	

Source: Inspectorate, Department of Education

* This evaluation of provision for pupils with special educational needs relates to primary schools only and not to special schools.

Follow-through inspections commenced in early learning and care settings

Follow-through inspection of ELC settings that had a published early years education inspection (EYEI) report commenced in late 2017. This inspection model was designed to revisit the actions advised in an ELC setting's most recently published EYEI report. The Inspectorate carried out 195 follow-through inspections in ELC settings in the period up to the end of December 2020.

Work commenced on the extension of the early years education inspection model to evaluate provision from birth to six years old

In November 2018, *First 5: A Whole of Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019-2028* was published by the then Department of Children and Youth Affairs (now DCEDIY). This strategy contains a specific commitment 'to develop, enhance and implement standards, and reform regulation and inspection systems'. As part of this set of actions, the Inspectorate undertook to develop and pilot the extension of the EYEI to the evaluation of early learning provision for children from birth to six years of age.

In order to extend the current inspection model to include provision for children from birth to three years old, the Inspectorate carried out a review of the EYEI framework.

The review was informed by:

- The findings of two extensive literature reviews carried out by the Inspectorate on provision of early learning and care experiences for children from birth to three years old

- The outcomes of a Listening and Learning Phase, conducted with early years educators

- *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*

- *Síolta: the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education*

- National policy, for example, the *TUSLA Quality and Regulatory Framework* and the *Access and Inclusion Model.*

At the time of publication of this report, consultation and piloting of the revised inspection model with the early learning and care sector had begun.

New models of school inspection were developed to support at-risk pupils/students and pupils/students with additional needs

Throughout the period to which this report refers, the Inspectorate developed inspection models to support children and young people who require particular kinds of educational supports. A model to evaluate the provision for pupils with special educational needs (SEN) was introduced in primary schools in 2016. This was followed in 2019 by the introduction of a similar model for post-primary schools, which replaced the existing SEN Subject Inspection model. This type of inspection aims to ensure that there is consistency and coherence between the evaluation of provision for pupils/students with additional and special educational needs, and the special education teaching allocation model for schools that was introduced in September 2017. In this context, particular attention is paid to the school's use of the *Continuum of Support*[5] and its adherence to the principles and actions outlined in *Guidelines for Primary/Post-Primary Schools: Supporting Students with Special Educational Needs in Mainstream Schools (September 2017)*.

In 2016, the Inspectorate also developed a model for the inspection of schools attached to special care units (SCUs) or to children detention centres (CDCs). These schools provide for children who are particularly vulnerable and experience high levels of need. The model was designed to fit the particular circumstances pertaining to the provision of education within these schools. The Inspectorate committed to a programme of annual inspections of these schools in order to quality assure the education provided for the children, and to provide advice and support to the teachers, principals and the managements of the schools. These inspections commenced in September 2016.

The child protection and safeguarding inspection model was designed to support schools in implementing the revised *Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools*

To complement the introduction by the Department of revised *Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools*, the Inspectorate conducted a major overhaul of inspection arrangements for the monitoring of child protection procedures in primary and post-primary schools. In early 2018, the Inspectorate introduced revised arrangements for the monitoring of child protection procedures in all inspections. These revised arrangements involved the carrying out of checks for compliance with key

---

5   The Continuum of Support (Primary) is available at: https://www.sess.ie/special-education-teacher-allocation/primary/continuum-support-primary and The Continuum of Support (Post-Primary) is available at: https://www.sess.ie/special-education-teacher-allocation/post-primary/continuum-support-post-primary

aspects of the child protection procedures. The level of compliance checks conducted depended on the type of inspection being undertaken:

- Level one checks were undertaken in the course of incidental inspections, curriculum evaluations, subject inspections, programme evaluations, evaluations of provision for learners with special educational needs, supporting the safe provision of schooling visits and follow-through inspections.

- Level two checks were undertaken in the course of whole-school evaluations (WSE), whole-school evaluation - management, leadership and learning (WSE-MLLs), Evaluation of Action Planning for Improvement in DEIS Schools, Evaluation of Centres for Education (Youthreach) and Evaluation of Schools at SCUs and CDCs.

The Inspectorate also developed the Child Protection and Safeguarding Inspection (CPSI) model as a stand-alone model of inspection to evaluate in an in-depth way a school's compliance with the 2017 child protection procedures. The inspection model involves level three compliance checks as well as developmental aspects. The development of the model involved considerable collaboration with stakeholders. Each CPSI comprises an initial and a final inspection. *A Guide to Child Protection and Safeguarding Inspections* was published in 2019, at which point a programme of CPSI inspections commenced in primary and post-primary schools. Further information on the development of this model and the outcomes of these inspections is available in Chapter 9.

A new model of inspection was designed to support schools in implementing the Department's guidelines for the safe and sustainable operation of schools during COVID-19

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the safe and sustainable operation of schools was a national priority. To achieve this, the Department issued detailed guidance[6] to all schools and centres for education. In collaboration with the Health and Safety Authority (HSA) and schools, the Inspectorate developed an inspection model, Supporting the Safe Provision of Schooling (SSPS), that monitored the efforts that schools were making to provide safe working and learning environments and provided a way in which inspectors could advise school leaders of best practice in providing a safe learning and working environment while dealing with COVID-19. Department of Education circulars 0040/2020 (Primary) and 0041/2020 (Post-Primary) set out how in the 2020/21 school year the Inspectorate would engage with schools to support teaching and learning and also to support the safe operation of schools using the SSPS inspections. As part of the wider national monitoring of safe work practices, the outcomes of SSPS inspections were reported regularly to the HSA and to the Department of An Taoiseach.

Inspectors' central involvement in the probation of newly qualified teachers drew to a close

At primary level, inspectors' central involvement in the probation of primary teachers drew to a close following a long transitional phase. Full responsibility for the induction of newly-qualified teachers into the teaching profession was transferred to the Teaching Council during the school year 2020/2021, and the Council's **Droichead** programme became the sole induction route available to these teachers. Previous Chief Inspector's Reports had noted that the provision of probationary inspections had had a disproportionate effect on the ability of the Inspectorate to deliver a balanced and adequate inspection programme. A review of the inspection data from the 2016-2020 period demonstrates that the reduced probationary workload facilitated a considerable increase in other types of inspection and advisory work by inspectors in primary schools.

---

6   *The suite of guidance documents provided by the Department to support the safe and sustainable provision for schools is available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/a0bff-reopening-our-primary-and-special-schools/*

2.3.3   Our advisory and support role

The Inspectorate continued to support schools in their implementation of the school self-evaluation process

As outlined above, LAOS 2016 provided a quality framework to inform School Self-Evaluation (SSE) and inspection. The quality framework sought to assist schools to embed self-evaluation, reflective practice and responsiveness to the needs of children and young people in their classrooms and other learning settings. In particular, the teaching and learning dimension of the framework was intended to support schools as they engaged in the school self-evaluation process.

Following the initial phase of SSE from 2012 to 2015, the Department published a series of circulars that outlined the requirements for primary and post-primary schools in their engagement in the second phase of SSE between 2016 and 2020. Unfortunately, industrial action by teachers in primary schools, which was unrelated to inspection or school self-evaluation, delayed the implementation of these circulars. When the industrial action was resolved, the minimum requirements for SSE that had been outlined previously in *Circular 0039/2016* were amended. In the period March 2018 to June 2020, schools were required to select either one or two curriculum areas or aspects of teaching and learning, based on the domains and standards of LAOS 2016, as the focus of their self-evaluation process (rather than the two to four areas/aspects that had been required by Circular 0039/2016).

At post-primary level, *Circular 0040/2016* advised schools to continue to use the SSE process to implement national initiatives, and to identify and work on aspects of their own teaching and learning practices that required development and improvement. It was anticipated that, typically, most schools would use the process to assist them in introducing and embedding relevant aspects of the *Framework for Junior Cycle (2015)*. It was also expected that schools would use the process to maintain a meaningful focus on literacy and numeracy.

In 2016, the Inspectorate published revised SSE Guidelines that took account of *Circular 0040/2016* and the feedback received from schools and the education partners. These guidelines, *School Self-Evaluation Guidelines 2016-2020 Primary* and *School Self-Evaluation Guidelines 2016-2020 Post-Primary* were designed to support primary and post-primary schools in their engagement with the second phase of SSE between 2016 and 2020.

At both primary and post-primary levels, SSE underpinned the implementation of new initiatives, including those relating to wellbeing and digital learning. The *Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice 2018-2023* included the intention that all schools would use the SSE process to initiate a wellbeing promotion review and development cycle by 2023; this has been extended to 2025[7]. *The Digital Learning Framework (2017)* complements the SSE process in relation to embedding digital technologies into teaching and learning.

The second cycle of SSE had been intended to last for four years but, because of the considerable challenges faced by schools in the 2020/21 school year, it was extended initially until June 2021 under circulars *0040/2020* and *0041/2020* and subsequently to June 2022, in light of the additional challenges faced by schools in the pandemic context. While the focus remained firmly on teaching and learning, the second cycle differed from the first cycle in that it allowed schools more flexibility and choice in how they managed and focused the SSE process.

To support schools in their engagement with SSE, the

---

7 *Cited in Department of Education Circular 0032/2021 (primary) and Circular 0033/2021 (post-primary).*

The purpose of each visit was to affirm good practice and to provide practical advice about how schools could advance their internal evaluation structures through engagement with SSE.

During the period September 2016 to December 2020, 2,293 advisory visits to schools were conducted. Of these visits, 1,418 were undertaken at primary level, with the remaining 875 visits carried out at post-primary level. This represents a decline in the number of visits in the period covered by the previous *Chief Inspector's Report (2016)*, where inspectors conducted more than 4,750 advisory visits to schools. The difference between the two periods can be explained by the significant time and resources invested by the Inspectorate in supporting the initial introduction of SSE in schools during the period of the previous *Chief Inspector's Report (2016).*

The Inspectorate has undertaken advisory visits to schools participating in a range of Department-funded and national initiatives

Since 2018, the Inspectorate has undertaken advisory visits to schools participating in a range of Department-funded initiatives. These include the School Excellence Fund (SEF), the Gaeltacht School Recognition Scheme and the Step Up Project (Figure 2.1).

In the SEF, the Gaeltacht School Recognition Scheme and the Step Up Project, schools are expected to use the SSE process to support the implementation of the relevant initiative. There were 419 School Excellence Fund – Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) and 10 Step-Up advisory visits undertaken during the period to which this report refers. There were 526 advisory visits conducted in primary and post-primary schools participating in the Gaeltacht School Recognition Scheme. Many schools also availed of advisory visits to support their implementation of the Digital Strategy for Schools 2015-2020. The resources provided to schools, such as the Digital Learning Framework (DLF) and the planning materials for digital learning, are closely aligned to the SSE process.

Developments and innovations in advisory and inspection work which came about as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic will be outlined in Chapter 10.

Inspectorate offered advisory visits to schools each year.

Figure 2.1:   Department-funded initiatives supported by Inspectorate advisory visits to schools

The *School Excellence Fund* is an initiative in the Programme for Government 2020 to encourage and recognise excellence and innovation in schools. Funding enables schools to collaborate, in some cases with higher education institutions and enterprise, on innovative solutions and gives them the freedom to experiment with new projects and find creative solutions to complex problems. Successful approaches are disseminated across the early years, primary and post-primary school sectors. The *School Excellence Fund: DEIS*, piloted in 2017, supports schools to work together to identify innovative solutions to issues that are context-specific and are aimed at tackling educational disadvantage and improving learning outcomes for students.

The *Gaeltacht School Recognition Scheme* was launched in 2017 as part of the Policy on Gaeltacht Education 2017-2022. The main objective of the Policy is to provide a high quality and relevant Irish-medium education for young people in Gaeltacht schools and, in this way, to support and encourage the use of Irish in Gaeltacht communities. Under the Policy, schools located in Gaeltacht language-planning areas were given the opportunity to express interest in participating in the *Gaeltacht School Recognition Scheme*. In order to achieve recognition as a Gaeltacht school, schools are required to operate fully through the medium of Irish (with the exception of the English curriculum and other languages), as set out in the Policy's language-based criteria and the Department's circulars on the Scheme. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, schools in the Scheme have been given an extended period of time, up to the end of the school year 2023/24, to gain recognition.

The *Step Up Project* was launched in 2018. The overarching aim of the project was to support schools already at an effective level of implementation of the *Framework for Junior Cycle (2015)* to move to a highly effective level. The project, which involved nine schools, was led by the Junior Cycle for Teachers (JCT) support service. Three link inspectors provided professional advice to schools as they developed and implemented their projects.

2.4. OVERVIEW OF INSPECTION ACTIVITY

The Inspectorate engaged in a wide range of evaluation and advisory activity

The tables in this section provide an overview of inspection activity in schools and ELC settings in the period September 2016 to the end of 2020. They also provide an overview of the advisory visits conducted by the Inspectorate and of inspections carried out by the Inspectorate on behalf of other sections in the Department such as the monitoring of the summer programme for pupils/students at risk of disadvantage or pupils/students with special educational needs. These include Youthreach centres in which inspections are carried out on behalf of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science; Irish language colleges in which inspections are carried out on behalf of the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media; and agricultural colleges in which inspections are carried out on behalf of Teagasc.

Table 2.3:   Inspections in early learning and care settings

	Sep – Dec 2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	TOTAL
Early Years Education Inspection (EYEI)	267	656	616	589	120	**2248**
Follow-Through Inspection (ELC)	-	26	77	80	12	**195**
Totals	**267**	**682**	**693**	**669**	**132**	**2443**

Source: Inspectorate, Department of Education

Table 2.4:   Inspections in primary schools

	Sep – Dec 2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	TOTAL
Curriculum Evaluations	63	154	221	177	60	**675**
Child Protection and Safeguarding Inspections (Initial)	-	-	-	13	19	**32**
Child Protection and Safeguarding Inspections - Primary (Final)[8]	-	-	-	12	5	**17**
Evaluations of Action Planning for Improvement in DEIS Schools (Primary)	10	10	10	19	1	**50**

8   *A CPSI comprises an initial and a final inspection. In a number of instances, the final inspection in a school was not completed in the same calendar year as the initial inspection.*

Follow-Through Inspections (Primary)	82	165	129	140	42	**558**
Incidental Inspections	163	286	282	374	89	**1,194**
Evaluations of Provision for Pupils with Special Educational Needs[9]	8	9	11	40	16	**84**
Whole School Evaluations - Management, Leadership, Learning	62	102	104	97	30	**395**
Whole School Evaluations	15	38	6	11	5	**75**
Supporting the Safe Provision of Schooling (SSPS) Inspections	-	-	-	-	431	**431**
Totals	**403**	**764**	**762**	**883**	**698**	**3,511**

Source: Inspectorate, Department of Education

Table 2.5: Probationary visits in primary schools

	Sep – Dec 2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	TOTAL
Number of visits to probationary teachers	603	3,352	2,572	1,090	118	**7,735**

Source: Inspectorate, Department of Education

Table 2.6: Inspections in post-primary schools

	Sep – Dec 2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	TOTAL
Child Protection and Safeguarding Inspections - Post-primary (Initial)	-	-	-	11	15	**26**
Child Protection and Safeguarding Inspections - Post-primary (Final)	-	-	-	10	7	**17**
Evaluations of Action Planning for Improvement in DEIS Schools	10	8	10	18	2	**48**
Evaluations of Provision for Students with Special Educational Needs	-	-	-	22	5	**27**

9   *During these evaluations, inspectors visit both mainstream and support classes, but do not conduct these inspections in special schools.*

						TOTAL
Follow-through Inspections	34	98	75	108	12	**342**
Evaluations of Schools at Special Care Units, and Children Detention Centres	1	8	3	7	5	**24**
Incidental Inspections	100	165	129	154	29	**577**
Programme Evaluations	6	25	23	17	7	**78**
Subject Inspections	120	275	252	282	59	**988**
Whole School Evaluations-Management Learning Leadership	36	79	78	65	24	**282**
Supporting the Safe Provision of Schooling (SSPS) Inspections	-	-	-	-	276	**276**
Totals	**307**	**658**	**570**	**694**	**441**	**2,670**

Source: Inspectorate, Department of Education

Table 2.7:   Inspections in centres for education

	Sep – Dec 2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	TOTAL
Evaluations of Centres for Education	4	1	7	4	1	**17**
Supporting the Safe Provision of Schooling (SSPS) Inspections	-	-	-	-	33	**33**
Incidental Inspections	3	3	9	8	2	**25**
Follow-through Inspections	5	2	3	3	1	**14**
Totals	**12**	**6**	**19**	**15**	**37**	**89**

Source: Inspectorate, Department of Education

Table 2.8:   Advisory visits to support SSE

	Sep – Dec 2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	TOTAL
Primary schools and special schools	1	11	600	723	83	**1,418**
Post-primary schools	7	303	299	249	17	**875**
Totals	**8**	**314**	**899**	**972**	**100**	**2,293**

Source: Inspectorate, Department of Education

Table 2.9: Other forms of evaluation and advice

	Sep-Dec 2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	Total
Evaluations of Coláistí Gaeilge (Irish Language Colleges in the Gaeltacht)	25	27	28	21	0[10]	101
Evaluations of summer Continuing Professional Development courses for primary teachers	40	42	41	44	54	221
Evaluations of Teagasc Colleges	-	-	-	1	-	1
Gaeltacht School Recognition Scheme: Advisory visits to schools	-	161	195	162	8	526
Gaeltacht School Recognition Scheme: Case Study Visits	-	-	-	18	1	19
Hearings under Section 29 of the Education Act	49	199	256	288	182	974
Inspections carried out in the context of Section 24 of the Education Act 1998	-	-	1	-	-	1
Inspections conducted for the purpose of school recognition	3	1	1	-	-	5
Inspections in European Schools	19	21	13	12	33	98
Inspections of campaí samhraidh for children (Irish- medium summer camps)	5	5	5	6	8	29
Inspections of summer literacy/numeracy camps for children	5	5	5	5	24	44
Inspections of summer provision in schools attached to Special Care Units	-	3	-	-	-	3
Inspection visits conducted in Emergency Reception and Orientation Centres	-	2	-	-	2	4

10 Coláistí Gaeilge were cancelled in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

School Excellence Fund DEIS: Advisory visits to schools	-	40	130	130	119	**419**
School Excellence Fund Step Up: Advisory visits to schools	-	-	3	6	1	**10**
Visits to schools to support the quality assurance of international assessments	-	-	157	0	-	**157**
Totals	**146**	**506**	**835**	**693**	**432**	**2,612**

Source: Inspectorate, Department of Education

* Data for Incidental Inspections carried out in Centres for Education to be included

#ASW19

Thematic reports were published on a range of areas

The Inspectorate publishes a range of reports and other publications to advise and support schools, policy makers and the wider educational community. These include national reports on different aspects of educational provision across the various sectors. Reports provide findings and recommendations arising from the Inspectorate's analysis of school evaluations and from research conducted on specific themes or subjects. The findings of these reports help to inform policy and practice in these aspects of provision. The reports often include examples of best practice and can be used by schools to improve aspects of their practice.

During the period covered by this report, the following thematic reports were published:

■ *Modern Foreign Languages: A Report on the Quality of Practice in Post-Primary Schools (2020)*

■ *Digital Learning 2020: Reporting on Practice in Early Learning and Care, Primary and Post-Primary Contexts (2020)*

■ *STEM Education 2020: Reporting on Practice in Early Learning and Care, Primary and Post-Primary Contexts (2020)*

■ *Education Provision for Learners with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in Special Classes Attached to Mainstream Schools in Ireland (2020)*

Two composite reports on inspection findings on the quality of educational provision in Gaelscoileanna and Gaelcholáistí, Irish-medium schools outside of the Gaeltacht, that covered the period 2017 to 2020, were published in Spring 2021:

■ *Irish-medium Primary Schools Outside of the Gaeltacht: What Inspectors had to say*

■ *Irish-medium Post-Primary Schools Outside of the Gaeltacht: What Inspectors had to say*

A range of Inspectorate research reports were published arising from a programme of research and advisory work with schools during the COVID-19 pandemic. By the end of 2020, the series had included seven reports and a summary report as follows:

■ *Resumption of Schooling Autumn 2020: Report on analysis of data from principals*

■ *Return to School: Report on analysis of data from principals, October and November 2020*

■ *Return to School: Report on focus groups with pupils and students, September and October 2020*

■ *Return to School: Report on focus groups with pupils and students, November 2020*

■ *Return to school: Report on findings of surveys in primary schools, post-primary and special schools, October 2020*

■ *Return to School: Report on findings of surveys in primary schools and special schools, December 2020*

■ *Return to School: Report on findings of surveys in post-primary schools, December 2020*

■ *Return to School: Summary of research, September-December 2020*

All of these thematic and research reports can be accessed at www.gov.ie[11].

---

11 *The suite of return to school reports is available at https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/a0bff-reopening-our-primary-and-special-schools/#reports-and-other-information. An earlier report is available at https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/87634-resumption-of-schooling-autumn-2020-report-on-analysis-of-data-from-principals/.*

2.5. SUPPORTING IMPROVEMENT AND CHANGE THROUGH INSPECTION

Our inspections are intended to facilitate improvement and change in schools. Recommendations and advice in an inspection report provide guidance for the school community as it seeks to bring about ongoing school improvement. Following an inspection, the Inspectorate also considers how best to support the school in its improvement journey. It does this through deciding whether further inspection activity is required in a school and, if it is, whether a different inspection model or a Follow-through Inspection, based on the initial inspection, is more appropriate.

2.5.1 Implementation of recommendations

The management in schools and settings have an important role to play in initiating improvement and overseeing the implementation of recommendations

The outcomes of external evaluation can inform and complement the outcomes of self-review and evaluation, and be used by the setting or school community to improve the quality of provision. Once an inspection is completed in an early learning and care setting, school or other education setting, responsibility for overseeing the implementation of recommendations and improvements identified in the inspection report rests with the management of the setting or school. The management of a setting or school, as well as the patron or trustees, also have a responsibility to ensure that effective follow-up action is taken.

School self-evaluation (SSE) is the process that primary and post-primary schools use to produce and implement improvement plans, to measure progress, and to identify achievements. A national commitment to establish a self-evaluation system for early learning and care settings is set out in *First 5: A whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Children and their Families*. This system will comprise a single national framework for early learning and care, and the provision of a range of materials and resources to support engagement with the framework.

2.5.2 Follow-through inspection

Follow-through inspections evaluate the progress a school or setting has made on implementing recommendations and actions in a published inspection report

The purpose of a follow-through inspection is to evaluate the progress an early learning and care setting, school or other education setting, has made on implementing the main recommendations, or actions advised, in an earlier inspection where a written report has been published or issued. This evaluation of progress is facilitated through a consultative, professional engagement between the inspector and relevant school/setting management and staff. Inspectors also advise the school/ setting on strategies and actions to enable them to fully address recommendations. A follow-through inspection may be conducted following on from any inspection type that results in a written or published report

Overall, a significant majority of early learning and care settings made progress on actions advised in early years education inspections reports; some actions advised by inspectors continued to present as challenging for settings

During the period 2017-2020, inspectors conducted 195 follow-through inspections in early learning and care settings. A total of 81% of settings had made progress (either partial progress, good progress or very good progress) on all actions advised in EYEI reports. Although this is encouraging, there were some actions advised that persistently resulted in either a rating of partial progress or no progress. These related to the following:

- Establishment of review processes to support self-evaluation and planning

- Establishment of relationships with primary schools to facilitate positive transitions for children

- Return to School: Report on focus groups with pupils and students, September and October 2020

- Engagement with parents as active partners in their children's learning
- Differentiation of the curriculum or programme of activities for individual children's strengths, needs and interests
- Enrichment of outdoor play and learning environments.

Good or very good progress was made in relation to the implementation of a majority of recommendations in inspection reports for primary, post-primary schools and centres for education

Between September 2016 and December 2020, inspectors conducted 899 follow-through inspections in primary and post-primary schools, reviewing the progress they had made in implementing the recommendations from previous inspections. Of these, follow-through inspections, 558 were in primary schools and 341 were in post-primary schools.

Table 2.10 below presents the progress that primary and post-primary schools had made on the implementation of recommendations. Progress was evaluated on recommendations in a range of areas, including assessment, compliance, leadership, management, planning for SSE, support for learners, and teaching and learning.

Table 2.10:   Progress made in the implementation of inspection recommendations in primary and post-primary schools, September 2016-December 2020

No progress. Count: 46 2%

Partial progress. Count: 433 17%

Good progress. Count: 929 35%

Level of Progress

Very good progress. Count: 1219 46%
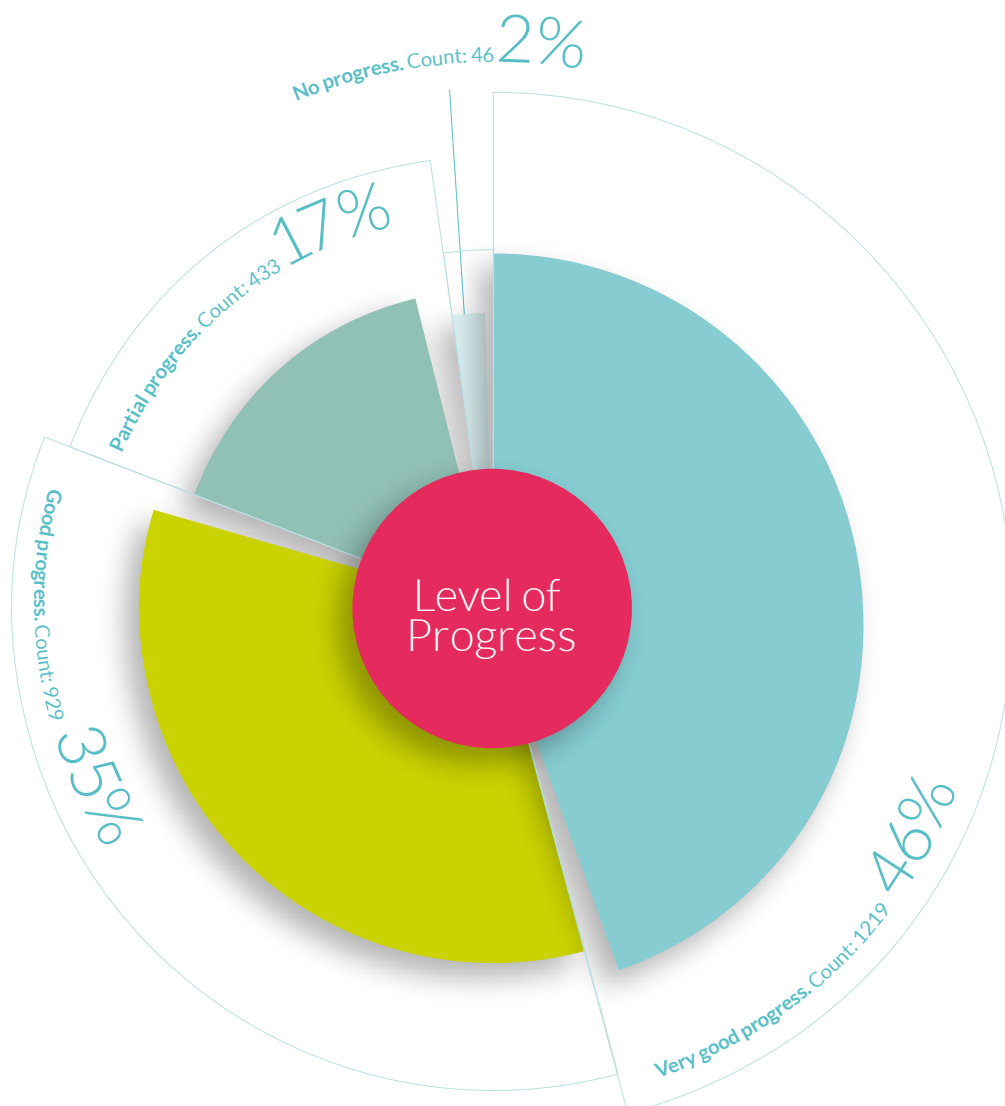
In follow-through inspections, where partial or no progress is made in addressing the original recommendations, inspectors give consideration to further inspection or to further follow-through activity. Further follow-through activity was recommended by inspectors in just under a quarter of the follow-through inspections undertaken in primary and post-primary schools from September 2016 to December 2020.

2.5.3 Supporting improvement

Some schools require support in ensuring that they bring about the required improvements in aspects of their provision

Most schools have the capacity to use inspection findings, along with other types of evidence gathered by the school, to plan for and oversee the implementation of the actions needed to address recommendations made in inspection reports, and to improve learning experiences and outcomes for all children and young people. There are, however, a small number of schools that require further supports in ensuring that they bring about the required improvements in aspects of their provision. This support is provided through two processes: School Improvement Monitoring (SIM), which is led by the Inspectorate, and the School Improvement Group (SIG) which is led by the Department's School Governance Section and includes representatives of the Inspectorate.

Schools with significant weaknesses related to teaching and learning are supported through School Improvement Monitoring by the Inspectorate

The School Improvement Monitoring (SIM) process is initiated for some schools where significant weaknesses that relate mainly to teaching and learning are noted during inspection, and which can be addressed through bespoke engagements with the Inspectorate. The engagements that inspectors have with schools in the SIM process are tailored to meet each school's individual context. Typical engagements include support and advisory visits, the conduct of specific evaluations, such as an Evaluation of Provision for Pupils with Special Education Needs, and bespoke support in relation to action planning for improvement. Table 2.11 provides an overview of the SIM cases that were processed from September 2016 to December 2020.

Table 2.11:   SIM cases in the September 2016 – December 2020 period

	Primary	Post-primary	Total
Active cases in July 2016	6	2	8
Schools referred to the School Improvement Monitoring process (SIM) in the period September 2016 – December 2020	17	12	29
Cases resolved in the period September 2016 – December 2020	10	8	18
Cases referred from SIM to the School Improvement Group (SIG)	4	0	4
Active cases: December 2020	9	6	15

Source: Inspectorate, Department of Education

The Department's School Improvement Group supports schools with significant weaknesses, particularly in relation to leadership and management

Another level of intervention for schools is the School Improvement Group (SIG). The SIG provides a co-ordinated approach to supporting schools where significant weaknesses in provision are identified, particularly in regard to school leadership and management.

The SIG consists of senior officials drawn from the Department's School Governance Section and the Inspectorate, and involves officials from other sections as necessary. The SIG provides a forum where serious issues that affect individual schools are discussed, thereby facilitating in-depth exploration of the issues and careful decision-making about how to support the school to bring about improvement. The SIG engages directly with the representatives of Education and Training Boards, boards of management, trustees or patrons of schools, as appropriate. It frequently requests action plans from schools for the implementation of specific recommendations, and progress reports on their implementation. A carefully planned inspection programme is also devised for schools in the SIG process to determine progress and to ensure that the requisite improvements are made. A school is removed from the SIG process when these improvements are made.

Table 2.12 provides an overview of the SIG cases that were processed between September 2016 and December 2020.

Table 2.12:   School Improvement Group (SIG) cases in the September 2016-December 2020 period

	Primary	Post-primary	Total
Active cases in July 2016	16	3	19
Schools referred to the School Improvement Group (SIG) in the period September 2016 – December 2020	16	12	28
Cases resolved in the period September 2016 – December 2020	14	3	17
Cases referred from SIG to the School Improvement Monitoring (SIM) process	3	8	11
Active cases: December 2020	15	4	19

Source: Inspectorate, Department of Education

2.6. QUALITY ASSURANCE OF THE INSPECTORATE'S WORK

We use a range of mechanisms to ensure that our work is conducted to the highest professional standards. These include internal quality assurance mechanisms and the use of external evidence.

We use a range of internal quality assurance mechanisms

Our greatest asset is the knowledge, skill and experience of our inspectors. We recruit inspectors from among highly qualified, experienced teachers using a multi-stage recruitment and interview process. We have developed comprehensive training, induction and mentoring programmes to develop and maintain evaluation expertise among serving inspectors. We also invest in the long-term professional development of inspectors, including the funding of post-graduate study and research by inspectors related to the work of the Inspectorate. In addition, we develop our inspection activities and models carefully through collaboration with school and setting leaders, teachers and early years educators, and drawing on the outcomes of trials in schools and settings.

Inspectors are supported in their work through comprehensive internal guidance and data collection systems, much of which have been revised in the 2016-2020 period. Finally, all inspection reports are subject to comprehensive editing and quality assurance processes prior to publication. All of these provisions are designed to ensure that inspection is carried out consistently, and that relevant information is collected reliably and reported on accurately.

We seek external perspectives on our work and use them to refine our approaches

We are also conscious of the need to seek external perspectives on our work and use them to develop our inspection approaches. An important source of feedback about the impact of our inspections comes from the responses that we invite from inspected schools and settings to provide for publication alongside our inspection reports. Following the completion of whole-school type inspections, we conduct surveys of teachers, principals and chairpersons of boards of management in schools. It is also open to teachers and early years educators, as well as owner-managers and boards of management who are dissatisfied with an inspection to seek a formal review of the inspection. Although the number of such reviews is very small, they are nevertheless important learning experiences for us. We have also begun to ask external experts to review aspects of our work. In 2019, we invited the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) in Northern Ireland to conduct a review of our work in the School Excellence Fund (SEF) DEIS scheme and, in 2020, ETI also reviewed the work of inspectors supporting the e-Hub project for the Aonad um Oideachas Gaeltachta.

Over the period 2019 - 2021, the OECD completed a Country Policy Review of early learning and care in Ireland [12] as part of its *Quality Beyond Regulations* project. The review focused in particular on policies that can support process quality, with a specific emphasis on aspects related to workforce development and quality assurance and improvement. The review made a number of key recommendations in relation to strengthening policy in these areas, including in relation to quality assurance. The Inspectorate is working closely with DCEDIY and the Tusla Early Years Inspectorate to ensure that these recommendations are implemented.

The number of early learning and care settings choosing to avail of the opportunity to publish a setting response increased; reflective, professional discourse became more evident in these responses

In the early stages of implementation of Early Years Education Inspections (EYEIs) (2017/2018), 18% of settings availed of the opportunity to publish a setting response as an appendix to their published report. In 2018/2019, the percentage of settings electing to do so had risen to 55%. This increase reflects positively on the growing confidence of early years educators to engage with the education focus of the EYEI quality framework. It may also reflect the influence of market forces, with parents considering published reports when selecting a setting for their child.

EYEIs also indicated that the focus of the setting response had progressed from complying with regulations to a more developmental and reflective approach. While there is still evidence that many settings continued to frame their responses from a compliance perspective, there was a small, but nonetheless positive growth in the number of responses where a reflective, professional discourse was evident. In the absence of specific research to establish the reason for this visible change in the number and nature of setting responses, it is difficult to identify any particular contributing factors. However, it is indicative of the growing professionalisation of the early learning and care (ELC) sector.

The use of quality-assurance surveys following the publication of whole-school evaluation reports was expanded

The Inspectorate first introduced post-whole-school evaluation (WSE) quality-assurance surveys of principals and teachers in October 2013. Since then, the use of these surveys has been expanded to include the views of chairpersons of boards of management and parents' associations. These surveys do not issue until the evaluation report is published. The returns from the surveys are used to inform inspection practice, and the review and development of inspection models.

Findings from surveys following whole school evaluations were generally positive, although respondents identified aspects of the inspection process that require attention, particularly in the post-primary context

The survey results for the period covered by this report indicated a high level of satisfaction with the procedures for whole-school evaluations, such as notification periods, and arrangements for factual verification and school response. The results also indicated a high level of satisfaction with the evaluation processes, such as evaluation of teaching and learning and the conducting of meetings. However, the response rates were relatively low and indicated a need to explore other means of gathering stakeholder feedback on inspection procedures and processes.

The survey responses, particularly at post-primary level, also suggested that the Inspectorate needed to consider the effectiveness of its current means of:

- engaging with children and young people during the in-school phase of evaluations
- conducting post-evaluation meetings
- considering and reporting on school context during evaluations

---

12 OECD (2021) *Strengthening Early Childhood Education and Care in Ireland: Review on Sector Quality.*
    Available at: https://www.oecd.org/ireland/strengthening-early-childhood-education-and-care-in-ireland-72fab7d1-en.htm

2.7 SUPPORTING CURRICULUM CHANGE AND DEVELOPMENT

The Inspectorate continues to support the implementation of Junior Cycle through advisory and evaluation work

As part of school self-evaluation (SSE) advisory visits, inspectors have assisted schools in applying the SSE process to the implementation of Junior Cycle. Through subject inspections and advisory work in schools, inspectors have also monitored the use of SSE in the implementation of Junior Cycle and the adoption of revised curricula in classes. Given that all Junior Cycle subjects are now implemented in schools, the 2021-24 strategic plan for the Inspectorate commits us to the targeted use of subject inspections and other inspections types to evaluate the effectiveness of Junior Cycle Framework implementation on a whole-school basis and in subject departments in post-primary schools.

The Inspectorate continues to support ongoing work on the review of Senior Cycle

In late 2016, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) commenced an extensive review of Senior Cycle programmes and vocational pathways, to include Transition Year, Leaving Certificate Applied, the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme and the Leaving Certificate. The Inspectorate has worked closely with the NCCA throughout this review. In particular, link inspectors for each programme and each subject specialism have contributed, and will continue to contribute, to the work of development groups as new specifications for the programmes are prepared.

The ongoing review of Senior Cycle is informed, in part, by lessons emerging from the implementation of the Framework for Junior Cycle (2015). The review is considering the future form and redevelopment of the existing range of learning programmes and learning pathways available to students at senior cycle, and also how to improve flexibility and choice for students. The Inspectorate is uniquely positioned to offer insights from its inspection activity in relation to how the implementation of Junior Cycle is transacting in schools.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Inspectorate's policy units contributed significantly to the Department's development of a range of guidance for schools and centres for education in the summer and autumn of 2020 to support their mediation of the curriculum in the 2020/2021 school year. We also played a leading role in the development of a suite of guidance documents to support schools and centres for education in continuing to provide learning opportunities for their pupils/students during the period of school closures from March to June 2020. These documents included guidance on curriculum and assessment, and guidance on supporting children and young people with special educational needs, and on supporting children and young people at risk of disadvantage in a remote teaching and learning context. They also included guidance to support parents and guardians while their child was learning from home.

Our policy units also contributed to a range of other Department guidance to support schools during the 2020/21 school year. These included guidance related to the safe and sustainable operation of schools, supporting pupils/students at very high risk from contracting COVID-19, guidance for the teaching of practical subjects, and contingency documents for remote teaching and learning in a COVID context.

The Inspectorate also played a key role in the development of the calculated grades process that replaced the normal Leaving Certificate examinations in 2020 [13] because of COVID-19.

---

13 *The Inspectorate also played a central role in the development and operation of the Accredited Grades process in 2021 which was put in place for Leaving Certificate Students in 2021.*

The Inspectorate supported the ongoing programme of reform of the Primary Language Curriculum/ Curaclam Teanga na Bunscoile

The period 2016-2020 was one of significant reform and redevelopment in the primary school system although progress was impacted to a certain extent by the closure of schools in March 2020. A new *Primary Language Curriculum/Curaclam Teanga na Bunscoile* (PLC/CTB) was introduced on a phased basis from September 2016. In the initial stages, teachers worked with the curriculum in junior infants to second class. Inspectors from the Department, together with the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST), the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), and, in the case of special schools, the National Council for Special Education (NCSE), engaged with principals, school leaders and teachers as they sought to become familiar with the new curriculum and began to implement it in their classrooms.

Many schools used the SSE process to support them in familiarising themselves with the learning outcomes and in their early implementation of the PLC/CTB. Inspectors' SSE advisory visits and ongoing evaluative activity also provided support and guidance to school leaders and teachers.

Schools' engagement with inspectors, the support services, the NCCA and other education partners highlighted the need for enhancements to the curriculum document. In the period from 26 October until 27 November 2018, the Inspectorate undertook forty modified, one-day, incidental inspection visits with a focus on the early experiences of PLC implementation in all school contexts. The findings of these visits confirmed that, alongside some positive feedback from schools and teachers, many teachers were experiencing significant difficulties and challenges in understanding and implementing the curriculum as intended. These findings converged with those of the NCCA consultation on the draft PLC/CTB specification for third to sixth class, which took place from February to May 2018.

The Department and the NCCA responded to these findings, and similar feedback from others, with an updated curriculum document for pupils of all abilities in primary school (from junior infants to sixth class) in English-medium schools, Gaeltacht schools, Irish-medium schools and special schools. Significant and innovative changes were made to the layout, presentation and content, resulting in a more streamlined and accessible document. The NCCA also developed a comprehensive online toolkit of support materials, which is reviewed and extended periodically. In September 2019, the finalised and updated specification for junior infants to sixth class was released online for teachers and schools. Inspectors continue to support schools in their implementation of the PLC/CTB, encouraging positive and rich language learning experiences and outcomes for all pupils.

Work is ongoing to ensure that the Looking at Our School framework remains accessible and relevant

The Inspectorate initiated a review of the content of Looking at Our School 2016 (LAOS), which is ongoing at the time of writing. The aim of this review is to reflect changes within the educational landscape over the 2016-2020 period, and to future-proof the document in as far as this is possible. An internal Inspectorate consultation process has led to a number of proposed amendments. Consultation with stakeholders, which was planned for summer 2020, was postponed because of the COVID-19 pandemic and is now due to take place in early 2022. This consultation will enable the Inspectorate to share these proposals and to seek additional/alternative proposals. Draft proposals include alignment with recent national initiatives, including those relating to student voice, parent voice, Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics (STEM), digital learning, modern foreign languages, Gaeltacht education, education for sustainable development, creativity and wellbeing. In addition, it is proposed that the document be aligned with developments in **Cosán.**

2.8. FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The Inspectorate's strategic plan was aligned with national priorities

The Inspectorate's strategic planning process includes consideration of medium-term and longer-term strategic goals for the work of the Inspectorate. This process takes place in the context of the broader Strategy for the Department and the education system that was set out by the Minister for Education in the _Statement of Strategy 2021-2023._

The strategic planning process involves the identification of priorities for the work of the Inspectorate and necessary actions to achieve these priorities. The process provides an opportunity to reflect on the work of the Inspectorate, on how the needs of the education system are evolving and on how the Inspectorate needs to adapt and develop its activities in response. The resultant plans and priorities focus on how inspection and advisory work will be developed and implemented.

The Inspectorate's strategic plan for the period 2017-2019 informed key developments in the Inspectorate's work over that period. Considerable progress was made in addressing the priorities that had been identified for the 2017-2019 period, as outlined in this report including:

- affirming our commitment to working collaboratively with children and young people, teachers, early years educators, school leaders and school management bodies in the development of our inspection processes as evidenced in the development of early years education inspections

- advancing the inclusion of the voice of pupils/students and parents in our evaluation and advisory work

- supporting the embedding of _Looking at Our School 2016_ more deeply in the school system

- extending the range of evaluations

- improving the inspection of child protection arrangements in schools

- extending our oversight, evaluation and reporting role in priority areas such as STEM, Digital Learning, SEN and Gaeltacht Education

- improving the Inspectorate's levels of engagement with early learning and care settings, schools and centres for education through evaluation visits, and also in the case of schools and centres for education through an expanded number of advisory visits.

Strategic planning is complete for the period 2021-2024

The _Inspectorate Strategic Plan 2021-2024_ was developed at a time of great change, challenge and upheaval for children and young people in Ireland. The adaptations that had to be made to education during the COVID-19 pandemic provided us with an opportunity to refine and refocus our priorities. In building on the learning and change in the COVID era, we identified a number of important themes for our work in the 2021-2024 period. These include:

- fostering improved and innovative educational partnerships

- ensuring that our inspection system and research activity can help to identify and target resources effectively

- communicating with greater impact

- improving how we use data.

In preparing the Inspectorate's strategic goals and actions for 2021-2024, representatives from a variety of stakeholders were invited to meet with Inspectorate senior management to give their perspectives on the following themes:
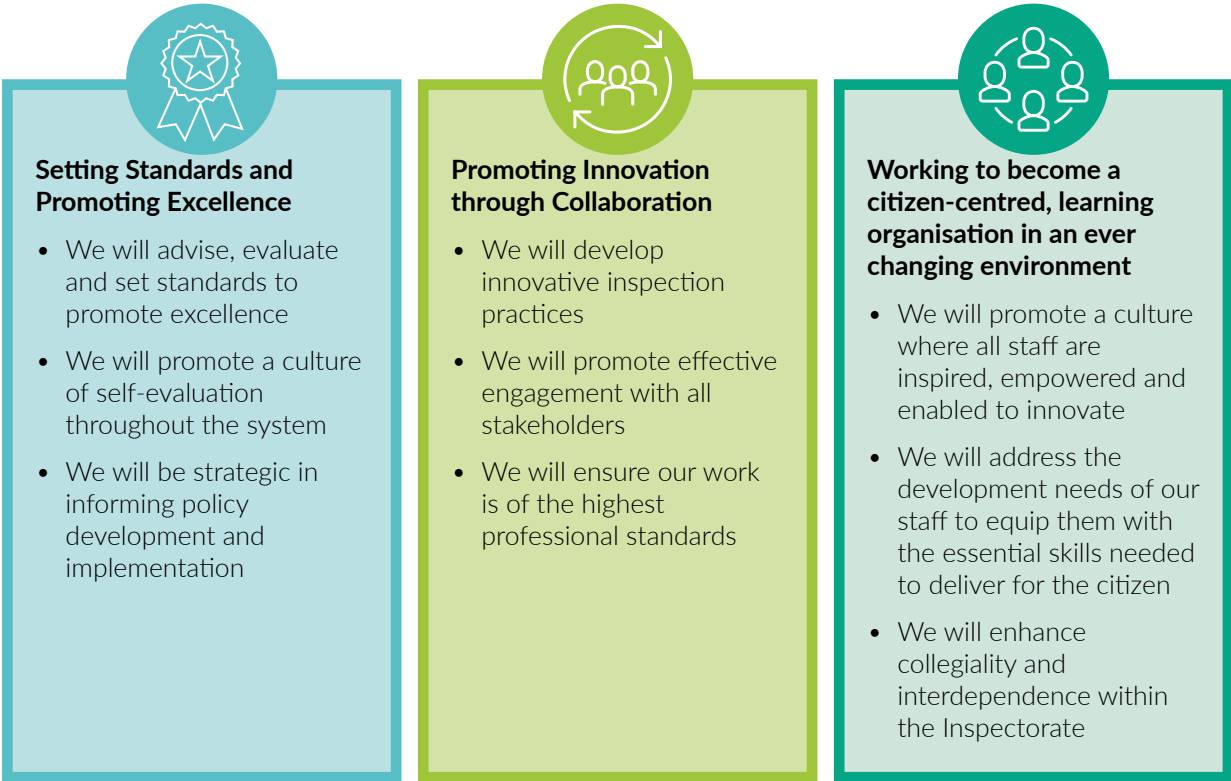
a. The changing needs of children and young people

b. The changing work of the adults who support learners

c. Challenges for the Inspectorate

Reflections were then shared with the wider Inspectorate, and all inspectors were involved in drafting the strategy for 2021-2024. The contributions from the various stakeholders greatly enriched inspectors' insights and understanding with regard to the challenges and successes being experienced across the education system.

Arising from this process of consultation and review, we have set out our Strategic Plan for the next four years under three main goals:

- **GOAL 1:** Setting standards and promoting excellence
- **GOAL 2:** Promoting innovation through collaboration
- **GOAL 3:** Working to become a citizen-centred, learning organisation in an ever-changing environment

Each goal has three strategic actions. These strategic actions will inform the targets we select for our annual Business Plans during the timeframe and enable us to measure the progress we make in achieving our goals.

Setting Standards and Promoting Excellence

- We will advise, evaluate and set standards to promote excellence
- We will promote a culture of self-evaluation throughout the system
- We will be strategic in informing policy development and implementation

Promoting Innovation through Collaboration

- We will develop innovative inspection practices
- We will promote effective engagement with all stakeholders
- We will ensure our work is of the highest professional standards

Working to become a citizen-centred, learning organisation in an ever changing environment

- We will promote a culture where all staff are inspired, empowered and enabled to innovate
- We will address the development needs of our staff to equip them with the essential skills needed to deliver for the citizen
- We will enhance collegiality and interdependence within the Inspectorate

2.9. KEY MESSAGES

Looking at Our School: A quality framework for schools

- The publication of *Looking at Our School 2016 (LAOS)* was a significant innovation. It provides a unified and coherent set of standards for teaching and learning and for leadership and management. It informs both inspection and school self-evaluation (SSE), and promotes shared discourse around the quality of aspects of educational provision.
- Work is ongoing to ensure that the LAOS framework remains accessible and relevant.

A greater range of inspection models

- The development of a greater range of models has facilitated greater inspection coverage of schools and early learning and care (ELC) settings, and more focused evaluation in areas such as special educational needs provision in schools.
- The Inspectorate developed specific models to evaluate the provision for learners with special educational needs, and to monitor the implementation of the *Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools 2017.*

Expansion of our advisory role

- The Inspectorate expanded its advisory role in schools; advisory visits have been undertaken in schools participating in a range of Department-funded initiatives, and also to support schools during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Informing policy and curriculum change

- The Inspectorate conducted a range of thematic inspections on education provision for children and young people from early years to the end of Senior Cycle in areas such as Modern Foreign Languages (MFL), Digital learning and STEM. A thematic evaluation on and provision in schools for learners with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) was also carried out. These inspections were designed to report on policy implementation and to inform future policy development.
- The Inspectorate continues to support curriculum change and development across all sectors.

Professional capacity of early years educators

- The capacity of early years educators to engage in professional discourse on quality in early learning and care has developed; this reflected positively on the growing confidence of early years educators to engage with the education focus of the early years education inspection (EYEI) quality framework.

Follow up from inspection

- Findings from surveys following whole-school evaluations (WSEs) were generally positive about the inspection process, although respondents identified some areas, particularly in the post-primary context, as needing development, notably in relation to how inspectors engage with students during inspection. Currently, the Inspectorate is developing its processes for engagement with students during all phases of inspection in schools, and this will help to address this.
- A substantial proportion of the recommendations in inspection reports are being implemented in ELC settings, and in primary and post-primary schools.
- The Inspectorate continued to engage in professional dialogue with stakeholders. The development of the Inspectorate's *Strategic Plan 2020-2022* involved extensive consultation with educational partners.

2.10. LOOKING FORWARD

Building on the learning from COVID-19

- We need to ensure that the Inspectorate continues to respond with agility to the changing contexts of schools and settings, particularly in light of the impact of COVID-19.

- We need to place additional emphasis on themes/areas of enquiry in our inspection models, such as wellbeing, anti-bullying and language development, particularly in light of the COVID-19 experience.

Increasing our impact

- To ensure that our work is conducted to the highest professional standards, we should expand the ways in which we quality assure it.

- To maximise the impact of inspections, we should keep our risk-based approach to inspection under review.

- There is scope for us to further refine how we support schools/early learning and care settings that are struggling in significant ways.

Hungary

Bangladesh

South Africa

Moldova

Mongolia

Mauritius

France

Slovenia

Chile

Kurdistan

Rwanda

3
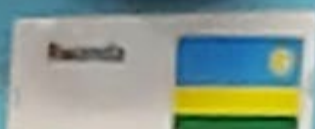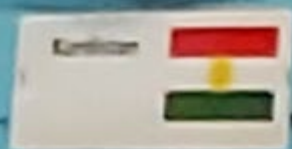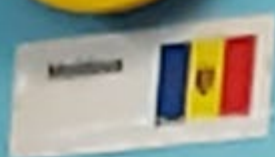
The quality of education provision in the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme

3.1. INTRODUCTION

Policy responsibility for the early learning and care (ELC) sector lies primarily with the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY). The Department of Education collaborates with DCEDIY in relation to certain policy aspects of ELC, including aspects of quality, workforce development and curriculum. The Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme, which is funded and managed by DCEDIY, provides universal access to two years of free early learning and care before school-entry. The ECCE programme is available to children between the ages of two years and eight months and five years and six months.

Tusla, the Child and Family Agency, is the independent statutory regulator for the early learning and care and school-age childcare sector. Early years education inspections (EYEI), which are carried out by the Department of Education Inspectorate and focus on the educational dimension of the ECCE programme, were introduced in April 2016 at the request of the then Minister for Children and Youth Affairs to complement the statutory inspections of early learning and care settings that are carried out by Tusla, the Child and Family Agency.

In the 2019/2020 programme year, there were 4,398 services contracted to provide the ECCE programme nationally. Just over 100,000 children were registered for the ECCE programme (attending either their first or second year). It is important to note that all ELC services are owned privately, and that managers/early years educators run services operating either on a not-for-profit or for profit basis. Further information on the ELC sector more broadly, and on ECCE specifically, can be found in the *Annual Early Years Sector Profile 2019/2020*.

Context

A diverse range of governance, workforce, curriculum and services in the early years sector

Education-focused inspections in early learning and care settings commenced in 2016

Inspections and reports

Context to support learning:
Good or better in
97%
of early learning and care (ELC) settings delivering the ECCE programme

Processes to support learning and development:
Good or better in
91%
of ELC settings

Children's learning experiences:
Good or better in
96%
of ELC settings

Leadership and management:
Good or better in
94%
of ELC settings

Good or very good progress in addressing over
two-thirds
of recommendations in early years education inspections (EYEI)

Key messages

The overall quality of provision in almost all ELC settings delivering the ECCE programme is good or better

There is potential to enhance learners' communication and higher-order thinking skills

There is need to embed internal review and self-reflection in all ELC settings

Further action is required to facilitate effective transitioning of children from pre-school to primary education

This chapter presents the key findings of evaluations conducted during the period September 2016 to December 2020 in ELC settings delivering the ECCE programme. In assessing the quality of education provision in ELC settings, the primary model of inspection used by the Inspectorate is the early years education inspection (EYEI) model which is complemented by early years follow-through inspection. During the period September 2016 to March 2020, the Inspectorate conducted 2,248 EYEIs and 195 follow-through inspections. These included inspections in a number of Irish-medium and Gaeltacht ELC settings.

It is relevant to note that the provision of universal free pre-school for children in Ireland through the ECCE programme was only established in 2010. During the development of the EYEI model, it was acknowledged by the Chief Inspector that many challenges to the delivery of high quality education which existed in the ELC sector did not apply in the primary or post-primary sectors. These include the diverse governance, workforce capacity, curricula and philosophy and range of services offered. In advance of the commencement of the EYEI model, the capacity of the ELC sector to engage with education-focused inspection was not established and was predicted to be variable based upon the considerable heterogeneity of both provision and practice. To respond to this context and to encourage positive engagement with education-focused inspection, the Inspectorate gave a commitment to seek to deliberately identify and validate strengths in both provision and practice during inspection. This translated into a commitment to deliver an evaluation of each setting that reflected its unique context and capacity for operation. These evaluations sought to engage with service providers and early years educators, and build their capacity for quality improvement with authentic, positive and practical external evaluation that was reflective of their immediate situation.

It is evident that this approach was well-judged as, even in the lifetime of this report, there was evidence of improvement in the capacity of the ELC sector to engage with, and respond positively to, education-focused inspection. This capacity has been enhanced by the increased investment by DCEDIY and its agencies in a range of funding and professional development opportunities for the ELC workforce. In time, as the capacity of the ELC sector is resourced and supported further, education inspections will continue to respond positively to the challenges observed in ELC settings by promoting exemplary and innovative practice and ongoing quality improvement across all settings. In addition to the publication of reports on individual ELC settings, the Inspectorate uses composite reporting to distil the general trends emerging from the experience of settings. We draw on that data in this chapter to illustrate the quality of ECCE provision in ELC settings in the period to which this report refers. Additional material included in this chapter is drawn from other evaluation activities, including cross-sectoral evaluations designed to report on practice in specific aspects of provision; for example, Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) and Digital Learning have been the focus of recent Inspectorate cross-sectoral publications.

In general, the findings from education inspection of ECCE provision in ELC settings indicate that the overall quality of teaching and learning is good or better. They also indicate that there is scope for improvement, especially in relation to the development of emergent, child-centred learning programmes and approaches to assessment, including the use of assessment information, to ensure that planning for progression and the next steps in children's learning is fully informed by their individual interests, strengths and abilities.

3.2 THE EARLY YEARS EDUCATION QUALITY FRAMEWORK

EYEI evaluates the nature, range and appropriateness of the early learning experiences of children participating in the ECCE programme. The EYEI model is designed to:

- highlight the importance of high-quality early education and care in nurturing the foundations for lifelong learning and in helping children develop to their full potential now and into the future

- identify and affirm good education provision in ELC settings

- support the ongoing development of educational quality in ELC settings through the provision of support and advice to early years educators about how children's learning experiences and achievements can be developed or improved.

The quality framework that informs evaluation during an EYEI, focuses on four areas:

- **Area 1:** Quality of the context to support children's learning and development

- **Area 2:** Quality of the processes to support children's learning and development

- **Area 3:** Quality of children's learning experiences and achievements

- **Area 4:** Quality of management and leadership for learning

In analysing and reporting on the findings of evaluations of provision and practice in respect of each of the four areas of the EYEI quality framework, inspectors use a quality continuum with five quality bands:

Figure 3.1: The EYEI Quality Continuum

Excellent	Provision that is excellent is exemplary in meeting the needs of children
Very Good	Provision that is very good is highly effective in meeting the needs of children
Good	Provision that is good is effective in meeting the needs of children but with some aspects to be developed
Fair	Provision that is fair requires practice to be improved to meet the needs of children
Poor	Provision that is poor is inadequate and requires significant improvement to meet the needs of children

Source: Inspectorate, Department of Education

3.3 EARLY YEARS EDUCATION INSPECTION FINDINGS

3.3.1 QUALITY OF THE CONTEXT TO SUPPORT CHILDREN'S LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT

This area of the early years education inspection (EYEI) framework focuses on the quality of the context to support children's learning and development, including the atmosphere and relationships that are evident in the setting. When evaluating this area, inspectors consider the way in which settings support children's sense of identity and belonging, recognise children's culture and backgrounds, and promote positive interactions and relationships within the learning environment.

EYEI findings, during the period to which this report refers, identified highly effective practices that contribute positively to children's social and emotional wellbeing. A key contributing factor is the establishment of partnerships with parents and families. While good relationships with parents were generally noted in the settings inspected, more formal approaches to sharing information with parents on their children's learning, which are essential to the establishment of partnership with parents in support of the children's learning, have yet to be developed in many settings.

The early learning and care settings inspected were generally characterised by warm, respectful and open relationships. More widespread use of a 'key-person approach' would help to build on this good practice

Between September 2016 and December 2020, the quality of the context provided by ELC settings to support children's learning and development was found to be good or better in almost all (97%) of the settings inspected (Table 3.1). In a small number of instances, inspectors noted that the quality of the context to support children's learning was either fair (3%) or poor (0.1%).

The quality of the context is evaluated using a number of indicators, including the atmosphere and organisation of the setting and the nature of relationships. Inspection findings during this period showed that the majority of pre-school provision in the settings inspected was characterised by warm, respectful and open relationships with parents and children. Features of good practice observed in such settings included the welcoming of children and their families into caring, warm and calm atmospheres, and responsive and respectful relationships between the early years educators and the children. To further strengthen the relationships with families, as well as providing emotional security for children to learn and develop, inspectors promoted the use of the 'key-person approach', whereby each child is assigned a named person who is primarily responsible for creating a close relationship with them and their family.

Table 3.1: Quality of the context to support learning (Area 1): September 2016 - December 2020

PERCENTAGE OF ELC SETTINGS	
Excellent	21.2%
Very Good	52.6%
Good	23.2%
Fair	2.9%
Poor	0.1%
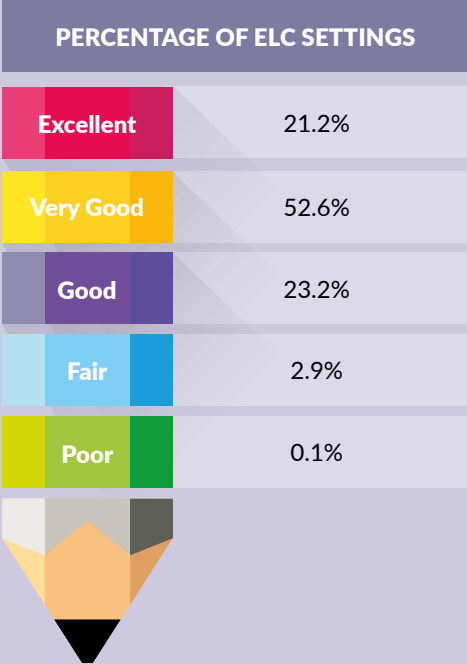
Source: Inspectorate, Department of Education

Inspectors noted that early learning and care settings fostered a partnership approach; there is scope to develop approaches for the formal sharing of information with parents

Inspectors noted that early years educators made good or very good efforts to engage with parents and to develop relationships that facilitate a partnership approach in support of children's learning. In general, ELC settings adopted an open-door policy that promoted the involvement of parents in their child's learning.

Many early years educators engaged in the informal sharing of information with parents on their child's daily experiences. Information and communications technology (ICT) was used frequently as a method of communicating with parents in relation to planned activities and children's experiences in the setting. Inspectors found good provision for the involvement of parents in settings, with parents contributing to activities to support their child's sense of identity and belonging, for example the sharing of photographs

and information about their cultural background, family and community. To enhance this good practice, the provision of information and guidance to support ELC settings in further developing their engagement with parents would be beneficial. In particular, strategies to promote the mutual exchange of information, relevant to understanding and supporting children's learning and development, between parents and early years educators would facilitate greater child-centred planning of learning experiences.

Examples of practice in highly effective settings included early years educators working closely in partnership with parents and external agencies, for example, those providing speech and language services, to implement specific learning goals for children.

3.3.2 QUALITY OF THE PROCESSES TO SUPPORT CHILDREN'S LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT

This area of the framework focuses on the processes to support children's learning and development, including the approach to the curriculum, the learning environment, and strategies to promote learning.

During the period to which this report refers, 91% of ELC settings were found to be good or better in this area (Table 3.2). In developing their approaches to curriculum, examples of good practice observed included settings having effective policies and procedures. Nevertheless, in about 10% of the settings inspected, processes to support learning and development required improvement. In these instances, core educational processes, such as curriculum or programme planning and implementation, and assessment for learning practices presented significant challenges for early years educators.

Many early years educators found assessment for learning and planning for progression in children's learning challenging. While the more positive ratings for Area 3, which focuses on children's demonstrated learning and achievement (Section 3.5), reflect children's competence as learners, it was evident to inspectors that capacity building in relation to planning for progression in children's learning is an issue that needs to be addressed. If professional educators lack skills to observe, plan, support and extend children's learning, this can result in children's disengagement and demotivation in the longer term. This finding identifies the need to focus policy attention on building the capacity of the ELC workforce in relation to early childhood pedagogy.

Table 3.2: Quality of the processes to support children's learning and development (Area 2): September 2016 -December 2020

PERCENTAGE OF ELC SETTINGS	
Excellent	6.7%
Very Good	39.7%
Good	44.4%
Fair	8.8%
Poor	0.4%
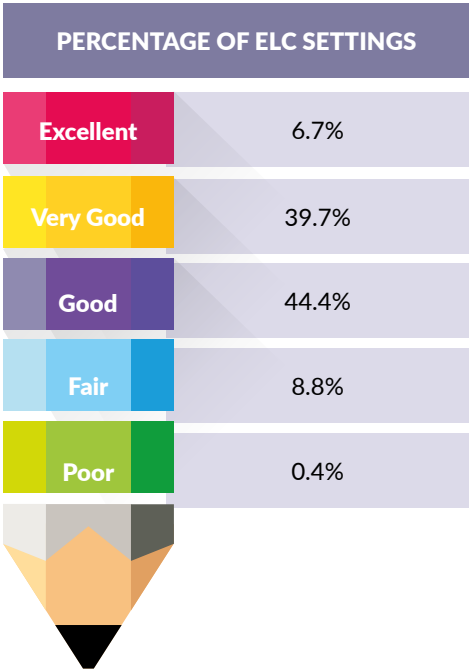
Increased use of *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* and play-based approaches is evident in early learning and care settings

ELC settings implement a number of different curriculum approaches, including those that are play-based, those that are facilitated through Irish (Naíonraí/Irish-medium settings) and approaches such as Montessori, Steiner and High/Scope. *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*, is the national curriculum framework for children from birth to six years. This framework elaborates national goals, principles and themes that should underpin the curriculum approach used by early years educators in ELC settings.

Inspection findings identify that most ELC settings use *Aistear*, to some degree, as a framework to support children's learning and development. Many promote an emergent, child-centred curriculum and plan a curriculum that focuses on being responsive to children's interests, strengths and challenges and that delivers meaningful learning experiences. This is a positive development and concurs with the findings of a survey conducted by Pobal in 2018/19 which found that 89% of ELC settings self-reported that *Aistear* was the most widely-used support for curriculum/programme development. This indicated a steady increase of 7% in settings using *Aistear* since 2016, while the uptake of other curricular approaches was similar to those reported for 2016/2017 and 2017/2018 [1]. The Pobal survey also found that settings reported that the implementation of play-based curricula continued to rise: from 52% in 2016/17 and 59% in 2017/2018 to 68% in 2018/2019. The findings also indicated that ELC settings in rural areas were more likely to follow play-based curricula, while the Montessori approach was more prevalent in urban settings.

Inspection findings indicate that preparation for learning, aligned with children's needs, interests and strengths, continued to present challenges for early years educators

Early years educators' capacity to plan for learning is critical to the quality of the children's experience. Inspection findings indicate that almost all ELC settings planned for curriculum implementation using a combination of long-term, medium-term, and short-term planning. Features of good practice observed included the regular use of pedagogical assessment and documentation of the outcomes of assessment in a variety of ways, for example learning stories and learning journals.

Early years education inspections (EYEIs) also identified effective practices in ELC settings that support the diverse needs and inclusion of all children. These include:

- the creation of a variety of visual supports to help children develop an appreciation of themselves as individuals and as members of their family

- early years educators working in partnership with parents and with professionals from a range of relevant agencies.

Areas identified in inspections as requiring further development in relation to preparation for learning that supports the needs, interests and strengths of all children include:

- the need for greater account to be taken of the child's individual learning needs, strengths and interests

- the need for early years educators to plan effectively for children's play-based learning experiences,

- the use of assessment to track progress and to create individualised plans for the learning of each child

- the preparation of individual learning plans for children with additional needs, including those related to their cognitive, social, emotional or physical development.

The challenge of providing a programme of learning responsive to the differing needs of individual learners has become more evident since 2018, when the ECCE programme was extended to afford children the opportunity to participate in pre-school for up to two years. Planning for progression in children's learning across two years of enrolment in pre-school is not well developed. While this is perhaps unsurprising given the recent introduction of this offer, it is an aspect of pedagogical practice that will need further development and support.

---

1   *The results of the Pobal surveys referenced here are included in the suite of Annual Early Years Sector Profile Reports that are available at: https://www.pobal.ie/research-analysis/early-years/*

Inspectors found that appropriate emphasis is placed on early literacy and numeracy in early learning and care settings. There is potential to enhance children's communication and higher-order thinking skills

Key successes noted by inspectors in relation to support for literacy in ELC settings included the active, positive role played by early years educators in children's early literacy development. Features of good practice observed included the effective development of children's language and communication skills through the use of rhyme, story, discussion and singing. In order to support children's communication skills, inspectors promoted the use of pictorial prompts, open-ended questioning and sustained conversation. To promote enjoyment of early literacy, including storytelling and dialogic reading, actions advised in EYEI reports included the development of designated book areas, the inclusion of reading material in the various play areas, and the reduction of group size for story-time and discussion. Inspectors also advised against the direct and formal teaching of literacy and numeracy concepts and the use of templates and workbooks.

EYEI findings note good work in relation to the supports for early Irish language learning in Naíonraí. Reports from Irish-medium settings highlight the active role of the child in language acquisition, and the critical importance of allowing natural progression in language learning to occur. The need to create regular opportunities for children to communicate in Irish was noted; to this end, a greater emphasis on the use of the bilingual or immersive language approach was encouraged.

EYEI reports highlight a range of positive ways in which children's early numeracy knowledge was supported. Among the practices commended by inspectors were the children's exploration of Montessori materials and open-ended materials, and early years educators' modelling and use of mathematical language, rhymes and songs. The effective use of active, engaging methodologies such as counting, sorting and classifying to teach early numeracy activities was also praised. In their advice to early years educators, inspectors emphasised the importance of having a broad range of high quality materials to support active learning in numeracy. They also advised early years educators to be mindful of the quality of interaction strategies used to support the development of children's higher-order thinking and learning.

There is evidence of the early formalisation of learning and an erosion of play-based approaches in some early learning and care settings

Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework locates play as the key methodology for children's learning and development. Play is viewed as a context for children to explore and engage in meaningful learning experiences, and to develop positive dispositions on which future learning is built. The research which underpins Aistear clearly locates play as the key methodology for children's learning and development. Play is viewed as a context for children to explore and engage in meaningful learning experiences, and to develop positive dispositions on which future learning is built. Inspection findings indicate that many settings and early years educators advocate actively for, and showcase, play-based learning. While this is very positive, some ELC settings report that parental and wider societal expectations are placed upon them to prepare children for primary school. Inspectors observed that settings who reported this pressure were often implementing a more formalised approach to learning, with a focus on letters and numbers, as opposed to a more play-based, hands-on approach to developing positive learning dispositions.

Positive findings reported by inspectors included the ways in which ELC settings actively promoted the development of learning dispositions, such as creativity, empathy, problem-solving, communication and independence skills. These practices were not to the fore in settings that had adopted a more 'schoolified' approach, typified by an adult-directed approach to supporting children's learning. The positive development of core learning dispositions, which are foundational for achievement in all stages of education, is most likely in enriched learning environments that recognise and promote the competence of children to be truly involved as partners in their own learning. Actions advised in relation to the development of quality provision and practice in this area included affording children meaningful choice and self-direction in their learning activities, and supporting children to reflect on their own learning. The need for hands-on, child-led, meaningful play experiences based on the interest of the child was highlighted by inspectors as key to the development of a quality curriculum.

Effective learning environments were characterised by careful planning, purposeful use of Aistear and high quality educator-child interactions

The quality of the learning environment is critical to the development of children as life-long learners, communicators and critical thinkers. Where inspectors judged the quality of the learning environment to be good or better, it was evident that careful consideration had been given to ensuring that the environment was planned thoughtfully in response to the children's interests and learning needs, and that it was challenging, enriching and supportive of positive language-rich interactions.

Inspectors also praised the purposeful use of *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*, describing how this supported children's language development, enabling them to use and transfer new language content and skills across a variety of contexts. Some of the challenges experienced in settings included the organisation of the indoor environment and the development of opportunities for outdoor play, including free play and play that provides opportunities for children to experience challenge and to take risks in their learning. This risk-rich play is central to the development of key skills such as self-regulation, problem-solving and independence.

High-quality, educator-child interactions are significant in promoting and extending children's critical thinking skills. Inspection findings in this regard were positive, and included affirmation of early years educators' use of strategies that enabled children to choose their learning activities and to demonstrate initiative when engaging in them. In some settings, actions advised highlighted the need for early years educators to recognise children's individual needs and to use a broader range of interaction strategies to support children's language and thinking skills. For example, greater use of open-ended questions linked to children's specific interests; documenting children's narratives in a manner that encourages the development of reflective capacity and self-awareness.

There is scope in early learning and care settings to enhance provision for the individualised needs of children

The introduction of a two-year ECCE programme for children from the age of 2 years 8 months, together with the fact that children may commence primary school at age 4 or remain in the ECCE programme until they are 5 years and 8 months, has resulted in a diverse age range in pre-school in ELC settings. The age range, coupled with children's varying abilities, highlights the need for early years educators to tailor their approach to teaching and learning to meet the variety of individual needs in their settings. Inspectors observed that successful provision for differentiation included allowing for long, uninterrupted free play times, both indoors and outside, that allowed each child to engage in unhurried learning activities. Expert scaffolding of learning activities by experienced early years educators in this context ensures that choice and agency to suit the individual interests and dispositions of the children, and the provision of learning experiences with varying levels of challenge, are provided. Despite the fact that a small number of effective examples of such practice were reported, the provision of effective differentiation remained an area of challenge for early years educators.

The development of emergent, child-centred learning programmes and approaches to assessment continues to present challenges in early learning and care settings

In ELC settings that had strengths in facilitating collaborative learning, inspectors noted children working and interacting in a playful, empathetic and cooperative manner that demonstrated their developing friendships with their peers. Where potential for improvement in this area was noted, inspectors typically advised early years educators to increase their engagement with children as play-partners. Such an approach allows early years educators to tailor support for children at all stages of development. Inspectors also highlighted the need for collaborative learning activities, both adult-child and child-child to be structured more effectively.

In relation to assessment of and for learning, early years educators used a range of strategies to document children's learning, but were less effective in using the data to inform planning for progression in learning. An area of challenge for settings was the use of assessment-for-learning strategies to ensure that the curriculum was tailored to meet the unique needs and interests of each child. Inspection findings identified the enrichment of teaching and learning by the inclusion of assessment methods that highlight learning dispositions and support future learning, as a key ambition for the coming years.

Overall, inspection findings indicated that there were significant challenges for ELC providers and early years educators in relation to planning for curricula and programmes of learning. A key area identified for development was the use of information on the children's interests, dispositions, strengths and abilities to guide the development of more emergent, enquiry-based learning programmes. The planning of strategies to support effective teaching, learning and assessment also posed challenge. Building capacity in these aspects of practice will also require support at a range of levels, including initial professional education and continuing professional development. Capacity building will also require comprehensive provision of a range of professional information, resources and supports including mentoring.

3.3.3 QUALITY OF CHILDREN'S LEARNING EXPERIENCES AND ACHIEVEMENT

Children possess an innate capacity for learning. This area focuses on the quality of children's learning experiences, including the extent to which children demonstrate engagement and enjoyment in their learning and a positive sense of wellbeing. Over the period to which this report refers, almost all settings (96%) inspected were found to be good or better in relation to the quality of children's learning experiences and achievement (Table 3.3). In 64% of the settings, this area was reported to be very good or excellent. The quality of children's learning experiences and achievement required significant improvement in 4% of the settings inspected.

Table 3.3: Quality of children's learning experiences and achievement (Area 3):
September 2016 - December 2020

PERCENTAGE OF ELC SETTINGS	
Excellent	14.6%
Very Good	49.9%
Good	31.2%
Fair	4.1%
Poor	0.2%
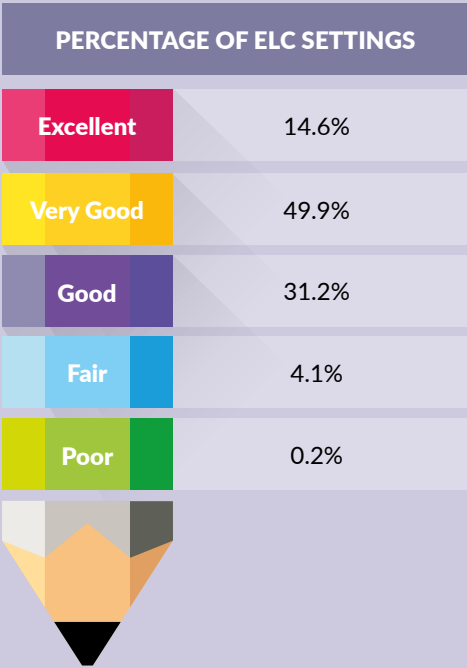
Source: Inspectorate, Department of Education

Child-centred approaches led to high levels of engagement, enjoyment and motivation in early learning and care settings

In ELC settings, features of good practice that were observed by inspectors included long uninterrupted free play times both indoors and outside, offering a broad range of activities, choice and agency to suit the individual interests and dispositions of all children.

In high-quality settings, inspectors noted that the children learned about the natural world through their experiences of both indoor and outdoor play. During walks, early years educators consciously drew the children's attention to the living world. Meanwhile, well-resourced indoor environments included elements of nature and natural play materials.

Wellbeing and the development of children's social, personal and health education are promoted

Physical activity is important for a child's mental health and physical development. Early years education inspections (EYEI) findings indicate that, in the main, children in ELC settings had regular access to an area or space to develop their physical skills. These settings offered indoor and outdoor free play where the children could further develop and refine their physical skills, such as physical fitness and motor development. Activities such as yoga, meditation and physical exercise, in both the indoor and outdoor learning environment, engaged the children's interests and supported their wellbeing. In a small number of settings, a lack of understanding of the importance of regular outdoor play, including risk-rich play, such as climbing or construction activities using real materials to promote children's holistic development was evident.

High-quality settings facilitate interactive free play that supports the development of children's personal and social skills such as self-regulation, co-operation and negotiation. There were some examples of early years educators supporting and scaffolding children's learning dispositions, including their independence, resourcefulness, persistence, resilience, creativity and curiosity.

Inspectors observed that children were enabled to use books creatively and to engage in the arts

Inspectors observed that children in ELC settings enjoyed many opportunities to use books creatively, engaging in stories with their peers, and discussing aspects of the stories on a one-to-one basis with early years educators. A range of books was used to support children's capacity to think about and reflect on a variety of topics. To further develop this good practice in relation to children's thinking and language skills, inspectors recommended that early years educators consistently use open-ended questions and prompts, such as *'I wonder why'... .*

Features of good practice in Art included the use of various resources such as construction materials, and mark-making resources, and strategies such as sensory play to extend learning and enhance children's creativity. Actions advised in reports included the extension of the availability and use of mark-making materials, and the importance of early years educators starting with concrete materials to support children's learning before moving to the introduction of more abstract concepts, for example learning about conservation of number through counting and sorting activities. It was found that many settings had a dedicated and planned period during the day where they sang songs and read stories. Occasionally, this extended to dance and drama.

Inspection findings highlighted strengths and also potential for improvement in the quality of children's learning experiences

Effective practices that supported high quality in children's learning experiences and achievement included the provision of well-resourced environments and opportunities for uninterrupted free play. Early years educators following the children's interests and supporting their critical thinking and problem-solving was also noted as effective practice. Where practice required improvement, some common themes included the over-use of adult direction, and insufficient opportunities for children to take the lead and use their initiative in activities.

Potential for improvement was noted in cases where more adult-directed pedagogical practices were observed. These tended to inhibit children's engagement in the activities. Inspectors also noted that the use of directive language by early years educators limited the development of children's independence and their capacity for self-regulation. In general, inspectors identified the need for early years educators to develop and deepen their understanding of the importance of children's reflection on their own learning experiences. Becoming skilled in self-awareness and self-reflection is a key support for

independence, motivation and persistence. These essential learning dispositions and skills support children to become partners in their own learning, who can identify and enjoy their achievements and use their self-knowledge to build confidence and capacity for further challenge.

3.3.4 QUALITY OF MANAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP FOR LEARNING

This area relates to the quality of management and leadership for learning in the ELC setting and includes the capacity of early years educators to engage in professional activities such as self-evaluation and continuing professional development (CPD), processes of internal review and planning for improvement, and the development of policies and practices to support transitions from pre-school to primary school. Many inspectors evaluated practice positively in this area but it should be noted that their intention was to recognise and validate all efforts to develop management and leadership of learning in the very challenging conditions for provision and practice that exist in the ELC sector. The findings reflect the fact that the ELC sector in Ireland predominantly comprises sole operators who are just beginning to engage with the concept of belonging to a wider professional community. The fact that qualification to practice in this sector was only regulated in 2016 and that the regulated qualification level is set at Quality and Qualifications Ireland (level 5), equivalent to International Standard Classification of Education (level 3), means that engagement in higher order professional activities such as reflection in practice and reflection on practice is not well established. Recognising this context, Department of Education inspectors identified that the skills and competences associated with leadership of learning is at an early stage of development in the ELC sector and will require significant support and investment if it is to fully develop to achieve high levels of quality. Therefore, the evaluation of existing practice has taken a very deliberate strengths-based approach to encourage all efforts being made to meet the criteria identified in the *EYEI Quality Framework.*

The overall ratings in relation to management and leadership were positive, with almost all (94%) settings found to be good or better (Table 3.4). Notwithstanding the affirmation of positive findings, a range of management and leadership practices continued to be identified as requiring considerable development across the ELC sector. In particular, there were challenges in relation to the development of internal review and evaluation processes, planning for quality improvement, integration of new knowledge and ideas into practice, engagement in CPD and in supporting children's transitions from ELC settings.

Table 3.4: Quality of management and leadership for learning (Area 4) September 2016 - December 2020

PERCENTAGE OF ELC SETTINGS	
Excellent	19.7%
Very Good	45.4%
Good	29.1%
Fair	5.6%
Poor	0.2%
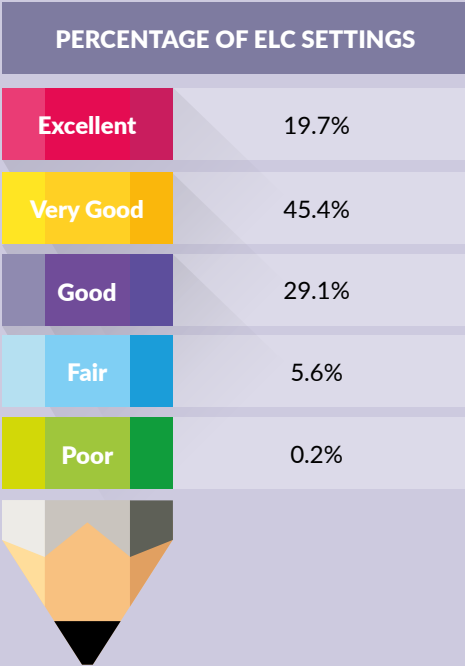
Source: Inspectorate, Department of Education

Managers and early years educators in early learning and care settings demonstrate very good commitment to participation in continuing professional development

Managers and early years educators in ELC settings demonstrate very good commitment to participation in ongoing professional development, which is essential to the development of a reflective and progressive learning culture.

Inspection findings indicate that engagement in informal self-evaluation is a feature of practice in most settings. There is a growing awareness that providing clarity regarding the roles and responsibilities of the early years educators in the setting, and the establishment of a positive and supportive professional work environment are strongly influential in the provision of high-quality early learning and care. Engagement in CPD has prompted settings to implement curricular change to enhance the pedagogy of play, and the quality of the indoor and outdoor learning environments.

Professional reflection has yet to be embedded consistently in many settings

The _Aistear Síolta Practice Guide_ provides guidance for self-evaluation and quality improvement planning for ELC settings. _First 5, A Whole of Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019-2028_ recognises that self-evaluation is an essential element of the early childhood quality assurance system in helping to meet and raise quality standards, safeguard and achieve positive outcomes for babies and young children, and in reassuring parents of the quality of their children's early learning and care experiences. This strategy has identified the embedding of self-evaluation as a core professional activity across the ELC workforce as a key priority.

Inspection findings indicate that professional reflection/review of provision and practice has yet to be embedded consistently in many ELC settings. Formal meetings to facilitate professional reflection and review of practice do not take place regularly, or at all, in many settings. Systematic, whole-service approaches to self-evaluation, with documented action plans and clearly outlined improvement targets, are not established on a widespread basis.

The use of the _Aistear Síolta Practice Guide_ to identify learning priorities or to monitor the impact of improvement initiatives on children's learning remains underdeveloped in a majority of the settings. This may be attributed to the limited availability of CPD or other support to assist ELC staff to use this important resource. Actions advised in Early years education inspections (EYEI) reports encourage early years educators to come together consistently for regular formal meetings that support them in planning for, and monitoring children's learning, and promote collaborative practice and the development of leadership capacities.

While early years educators use strategies to support the transition from pre-school to primary school, many early learning and care settings have yet to establish professional links with their local primary school/s

EYEI findings indicate that early years educators use a range of effective strategies to explore the transition to primary school with the children. These include circle time discussion, role play with school uniforms available in the dressing-up area, and a display of pictures of the schools. In some instances, children and early years educators visited the local school/s or invited teachers from the local schools to visit the ELC setting. Some good examples of engaging with parents have also been observed, for example preparation of advice leaflets. However, inspectors also noted that many settings had yet to establish professional relationships with their local schools and indeed, many reported challenges in this regard.

Actions advised in reports encouraged ELC settings to develop formal links with the local primary school/s to promote the sharing of information and the sensitive management of the children's transition from the setting to primary school. Early years educators were also advised to consider strategies such as inviting the teachers of junior infants to visit the setting, organising for the children to visit the school, taking photographs of the local schools to share with the children, or asking a 'graduate' from their setting to come and talk to the children about their primary school. Inspectors acknowledged that building relationships between pre-school and primary schools is not a long established practice in Ireland and will require support and guidance.

3.4 FOLLOW-THROUGH INSPECTION FINDINGS

Follow-through inspections evaluate the progress made in implementing the recommendations in the most recent early years education inspection report

Follow-through inspection of ELC settings that had a published EYEI report commenced in late 2017. These inspections evaluate the progress that an ELC setting has made in implementing actions advised to improve the quality of provision and practice across the four areas of the early years (EY) quality framework in their most recently published report arising from an EYEI.

The follow-through inspection uses the following four ratings:

Figure 3.2: Follow-through inspection ratings in ELC settings: September 2017- December 2020
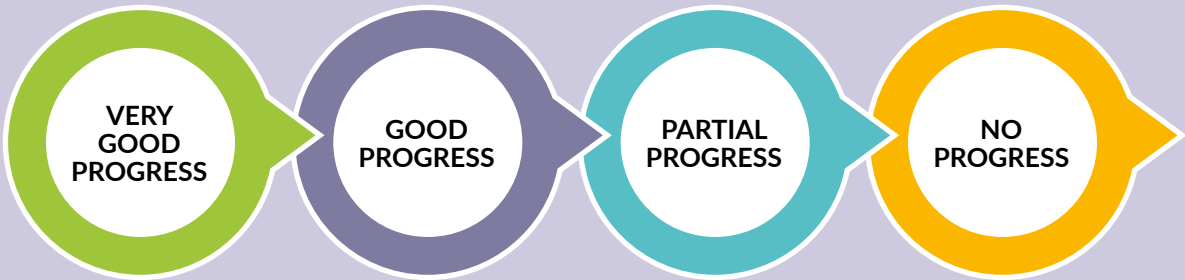
Source: Inspectorate, Department of Education

In total, 195 follow-through inspections were conducted between September 2017 and the end of 2020.

In the EYEIs that were the subject of the follow-through inspections, actions were advised across all four areas of the EY quality framework (Table 3.5). The greatest number of actions advised related to Area 2, quality of the processes to support children's learning and development. While the overall quality of provision in this area was good (91% good or better), the quality had been found to be fair in a greater percentage of settings (9%) than in any of the other areas. The least number of actions advised related to Area 4, Quality of management and leadership for learning.

Table 3.5: Actions advised across the four areas of the Early Years Quality Framework during follow-through inspections in ELC settings: September 2017 - December 2020

Source: Inspectorate, Department of Education

The highest level of success was in addressing actions advised in relation to the quality of the context to support children's learning and development; early learning and care settings were less successful in addressing improvements in the quality of management and leadership

Overall, there was good or very good progress in addressing over two-thirds of the actions advised in EYEI reports. When broken down into the four areas of the EY quality framework, the highest levels of success in addressing actions advised were in Area 1, Quality of the context to support children's learning and development. In this area, good progress or better was made in progressing 81% of the actions advised (Table 3.6).

Making improvements in Area 4, quality of management and leadership for learning, provided a greater challenge for settings; good or very good progress was made in 60% of the actions advised, with partial or no progress made in 40% of them. The establishment of review processes to support self-evaluation emerged frequently as an area in which settings had made partial or no progress. The involvement of parents in the process of internal setting review and, more generally, as active partners in their children's learning, was also an area requiring further development in many settings. Another area in which progress was limited was in the establishment of relationships with primary schools to facilitate positive transitions for children.

From a curriculum perspective, the findings from follow-through inspections indicate that further work is required in differentiating the curriculum or programme of activities to take account of children's strengths, needs and interests. Also, the enrichment of outdoor play and learning environments was recommended frequently as an area requiring further follow-up.

Table 3.6: Follow-through inspections in ELC settings- Progress in implementing the actions advised by inspectors: September 2017 - December 2020

	AREA 1	AREA 2	AREA 3	AREA 4
Very Good Progress	57.4%	35.2%	42.3%	32.8%
Good Progress	23.5%	34.5%	29.8%	27.1%
Partial Progress	15.4%	25.1%	22.9%	22.8%
No Progress	3.7%	5.2%	5.0%	17.3%

Source: Inspectorate, Department of Education

3.5 THEMATIC INSPECTION FINDINGS

Science, technology, engineering and mathematics learning practice is not yet embedded in ELC settings

During the period January 2019 to December 2019, the Inspectorate conducted an evaluation of the first phase of the *STEM Education Policy Statement 2017-2026* in a sample of ELC settings, as well as in primary schools and post-primary schools.

In relation to ELC settings, the findings recognised that children's exploration, questioning and problem-solving through play and investigation, as espoused by Aistear, underpin their development of basic concepts in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM). The report also noted that children's innate curiosity makes them prime candidates to take on their role of explorer, scientist and investigator, and that skilled early years educators can enrich their learning in this area.

However, the report notes that supports for ELC settings in developing STEM pedagogies and facilitating STEM learning experiences are embryonic in comparison with those for primary or post-primary schools. It advises that further policy initiatives, supports and actions are necessary to ensure that early years educators and ELC settings are supported fully so that STEM learning practice can become systematic and embedded.

Digital technologies are mentioned as part of children's learning in *Aistear*; there is not yet consensus regarding best practice in their use within early learning and care settings

During the period January to December 2019, the Inspectorate also conducted an evaluation of digital learning in a sample of ELC settings, primary schools and post-primary schools. The report noted that while the _Digital Strategy for Schools_ specifically addresses the formal school system, the foundations for digital learning begin in early childhood. While digital technologies and information and communications technology (ICT) are mentioned as part of children's learning in _Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework_, the report acknowledged that there is not yet consensus in the system regarding whether or how digital technology should be used by young children as part of their daily learning experience within ELC settings, and whether good practice may vary according to the age of the child. The report also identified that further research and engagement with the ELC sector is needed in order to develop guidance regarding what constitutes good practice in young children's use of digital technology within ELC settings.

Although ELC settings are not required to develop a digital learning plan, inspectors found that the majority of the ELC settings had given some consideration to planning to build the foundation steps of digital learning. Inspectors noted some examples of knowledge and content creation in ELC settings, and also found examples of the use of digital technologies by early years educators as an additional support for communication with parents.

Not surprisingly, in a number of ELC settings, owner/managers and early years educators reported to inspectors that they were unsure how to approach digital learning in a way that was appropriate to the age of the children. However, the report identified effective use of digital technologies in assessment practices, for example to capture and share children's learning as outlined in the following spotlight.

Spotlight...

In one ELC setting, the early years educators used technology as part of assessment. Digital technologies were used to capture children's learning experiences and the products of their learning. The early years educators used video technology and cameras, and the children were very comfortable in using this equipment for their own learning. Early years educators recorded children talking about their learning and created videos and digital stories about their learning journeys. These resources were available to parents and families via the setting's social media channels and applications, both of which allowed parents and families to be part of the learning conversation and to celebrate the children's learning. Features of good practice included early years educators' use of digital technology to record observations of practice for communication with parents.

3.6 KEY MESSAGES

- The overall quality of provision in almost all ELC settings is good or better.

Context to support learning

- The majority of pre-schools inspected were characterised by warm, respectful and open relationships with parents and children. More formal approaches to sharing information with parents on their children's learning have yet to be developed in many settings.

Processes to support children's learning and development

- The extension of the ECCE programme to afford children up to two years of free pre-school education has posed additional challenges for settings in meeting the differing needs of individual learners.

- Planning practices for children with additional needs in early learning and care (ELC) settings should be developed further to include a greater emphasis on children's individual needs.

- There has been an increase in the use of play-based approaches to learning. However, because of a misperception that it is the role of ELC settings to prepare children for primary school, some settings have adopted an overly-formalised approach to learning.

- The development of emergent, child-centred learning programmes and approaches to assessment, including the use of assessment information to inform the next steps in children's learning, continue to present a challenge in ELC settings.

- There is a good focus on early literacy and numeracy in ELC settings. However, there is potential to improve approaches to support the development of children's communication and higher-order thinking skills.

Children's learning experiences and achievement

- Quality learning experiences in ELC settings were characterised by child-centred approaches which led to high levels of engagement, enjoyment, motivation and achievement among children.

- Where practice required improvement, challenges were most often related to the over-use of adult direction and insufficient opportunities for children to take the lead and use their initiative in activities.

Management and leadership for learning

- Internal review and self-reflection and evaluation practices have yet to be embedded consistently in all ELC settings. Greater emphasis on embedding these processes in ELC settings is required. This is identified as a key priority outlined in the *First 5; A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019-2028*.

- While early years educators use some strategies to support the transition from pre-school to primary school, many ELC settings have yet to establish professional links with their local schools.

- Early years educators demonstrate positive dispositions towards engaging in CPD. However, additional support for and resources tailored to the development of leadership capacity are a priority.

3.7 LOOKING FORWARD

Sharing information with parents

- ELC settings need to be supported in developing approaches that facilitate the formal sharing of information about children's learning with parents.

Supporting children's learning and development

- Consideration needs to be given to the provision of CPD opportunities for ELC providers, particularly in relation to the implementation of an emergent, enquiry-based curriculum, approaches to assessment and differentiated approaches to learning.

- Early years educators in ELC settings should place a greater emphasis on collaborative curriculum/programme planning that supports the provision of a more connected, holistic learning experience for children, and is reflective of children's perspectives and opinions.

- As envisaged in *First 5; A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019-2028*, the Inspectorate will continue to work with the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY), the Tusla Early Years Inspectorate and the Better Start National Quality Development Service to develop a coherent single quality framework, and to better integrate and coordinate inspection and quality supports.

Use of digital technology in ELC settings

- Further research and engagement with the ELC sector should be undertaken to develop guidance regarding best practice in young children's use of digital technology in ELC settings. The ELC sector should also be included in future digital learning strategies.

Supporting the transition from pre-school to primary

- All ELC settings should be supported to establish professional links with their local primary schools in order to facilitate the effective transitioning of children from pre-school to primary education.

4

The Quality of Teaching & Learning in Primary Schools

4.1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents the key findings of inspections conducted in primary schools and special schools during the period September 2016 to December 2020. It draws from data gathered during announced inspections, including whole school evaluations (WSE), whole school evaluations-management, leadership and learning (WSE-MLL) and curriculum evaluations. It also draws from data gathered during incidental inspections, which are typically unannounced and involve the observation of teaching and learning in a number of curriculum areas in up to three learning settings over the course of a school day. During the September 2016 to December 2020 period, 3,234 lessons were observed in the course of WSE inspections, 7,985 lessons were inspected in the course of WSE-MLL inspections, and 4,376 lessons were inspected during curriculum evaluations. Inspectors also evaluated the quality of teaching and learning, and engaged with pupils about their learning in 6,012 lessons during incidental inspections.

During this same period, several key strategies were launched or progressed. The _National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People, 2011-2020_ became well embedded and, as all the targets set for reading and Mathematics at primary level were reached by 2017, more ambitious targets were set for higher-achieving pupils. The _Digital Strategy for Schools 2015-2020_ provided an action plan for integrating information and communications technology (ICT) into teaching, learning and assessment practices in schools. The _STEM Education Policy Statement 2017–2026_ and _STEM Education Implementation Plan 2017-2019_ were both launched in 2017, with a view to embedding these skills into teaching and learning. The _Policy on Gaeltacht Education 2017–2022_ provided a comprehensive set of actions, spanning a range of areas that aimed to strengthen the provision of Irish-medium education in Gaeltacht schools.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, schools closed without notice in March 2020. Commendable work was undertaken by many schools in mediating the primary curriculum during the period following the closures, despite challenges such as putting the necessary communication and digital learning arrangements in place, and supporting the wellbeing of pupils and staff. During this first period of school closures, the system became acutely aware of the importance of digital learning, and funding and supports were provided to schools. Schools re-opened in September 2020 with due attention given to the wellbeing, and health and safety of pupils and staff. During this re-opening and operating phase from September to December 2020, we learned through our advisory and research engagements how teaching and learning were impacted during this time, how new approaches to feedback and to the use of digital technologies emerged, and how modes of teaching and learning evolved. We considered the implications of these developments for the future.

The findings from our inspections, evaluations and assessments between September 2016 and December 2020 indicate that the overall quality of teaching and learning in primary schools and special schools in Ireland is very good. These positive findings reflect the commitment and hard work of our school communities and also the significant effort put into curricular review and redevelopment, and into the implementation of the _National Strategy to improve Literacy and Numeracy_, the _STEM Education Policy Statement 2017-2026_, the _Digital Strategy for Schools 2015-2020_ and the _Policy on Gaeltacht Education 2017-2022._

Context

The *Literacy and Numeracy Strategy 2011* became well embedded

The *STEM Education Policy Statement 2017–2026* and *Implementation Plan 2017–2019* were launched

The primary language curriculum required a significant adjustment

PIRLS 2019: Irish pupils' overall reading achievement continued to improve with only one other OECD country outperforming Ireland in the new online reading assessment

TIMSS 2019
• Ireland is the top performing EU country in Mathematics at fourth class level
• The highest performing pupils in Ireland in Mathematics and Science are underperforming, relative to countries with similar overall performance levels
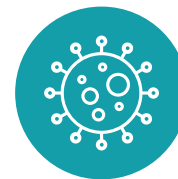
Schools were closed for lengthy periods due to the **COVID-19** pandemic

Inspections and reports

Teaching
Good or very good in
86%
of inspections

Learning
Good or very good in
85%
of inspections

Curricular planning
Good or very good in
67%
of primary and special schools

Assessment
Good or very good in
44%
of unannounced inspections;
66%
of announced inspections

Effective catering for the range of learning needs:
49%
of lessons during unannounced inspections;
69%
of lessons during announced inspections

54%
of primary pupils reported that they use digital technologies during some lessons

Key messages

Teaching and learning is generally good or very good in primary and special schools

There is need for more active and learner-centred teaching approaches

Pupils' learning outcomes, motivation and engagement in Irish need to be improved

There is need to develop and embed whole-school assessment strategies

4.2 TEACHING, LEARNING AND ASSESSMENT

4.2.1 TEACHING AND LEARNING

In primary schools and special schools, the overall quality of teaching was found to be good or very good in 86% of inspections conducted over the September 2016 to December 2020 period (Table 4.1). It was found to be satisfactory in 12% of inspections, and less than satisfactory in 1.9% of inspections. The overall quality of learning was also of a high standard; it was found to be good or very good in 85% of inspections, satisfactory in 12% of inspections and less than satisfactory in 2.6% of inspections.

Table 4.1: Quality of teaching and learning in primary and special schools: September 2016 - December 2020

	Overall quality of teaching	Overall quality of learning
	During Incidental Inspections, Curriculum Evaluations, WSE-MLL and WSE	
Very good	25.5%	24.8%
Good	60.8%	60.1%
Satisfactory	11.8%	12.5%
Fair	1.7%	2.4%
Weak	0.2%	0.2%

Teaching approaches were good or very good in a majority of lessons; however, active and pupil-centred teaching approaches were not used consistently

When teachers use methodologies that are appropriate to the learning objective and to the varying needs and abilities of pupils, they can stimulate substantial pupil response, facilitate deep engagement with pupils and achieve an appropriate balance between their own input and productive pupil participation.

At primary level and in special schools, teaching approaches were found to be good or very good in 70% of the lessons observed during unannounced inspections and in 80% of lessons observed during announced inspections (Table 4.2). They were found to be less than satisfactory in 8% of lessons observed during unannounced inspections and in 3% of lessons observed during announced inspections.

Features of good practice included teachers' positive engagement with _Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework_ in infant classes. Findings also noted that where playful and engaging pedagogies were implemented effectively across the school, they enhanced the learning experiences of pupils. However, as also indicated in the last _Chief Inspector's Report_, many teachers were not using active and child-centred teaching approaches in accordance with the Primary Curriculum, 1999. Overall, inspection findings for the September 2016 to December 2020 period indicate that there is a need for greater use of active methodologies and approaches in classrooms that stimulate innovation and creativity.

.

Table 4.2: Quality of teaching approaches in primary and special schools: September 2016-December 2020

Teaching approaches	Unannounced inspections	Announced inspections
Very good	25.5%	38.2%
Good	44.1%	41.8%
Satisfactory	22.7%	16.5%
Fair	6.8%	3.1%
Weak	0.9%	0.4%

Inspection findings show that catering for the varying abilities of pupils continues to present challenges for teachers

Differentiation refers to the means by which teachers tailor the way they teach and facilitate pupils' learning to meet the variety of individual needs in their classrooms. Effective differentiation requires a responsiveness and agility on the part of the teacher to adapt to varying and emergent pupil needs and an ability to motivate, challenge and enthuse the pupils through the provision of meaningful and enjoyable learning experiences. Information gained from assessment can enable teachers to make more informed decisions when planning for differentiated learning.

Inspection findings from the September 2016 to December 2020 period show that catering for the varying abilities of pupils in primary schools and special schools is an aspect of provision that continues to require considerable attention and improvement. Differentiation was good or very good in about half (49%) of the lessons observed across unannounced inspections in primary schools and special schools (Table 4.3). A need to improve approaches to differentiation was identified in 51% of the lessons observed. In announced inspections, in-class support for the learning needs of pupils who were experiencing challenges in aspects of their learning was found to be good or very good in 69% of cases, with scope for improvement in the remaining 31%. Inspection findings also indicate that inadequate attention is being given to challenging exceptionally able pupils in aspects of the curriculum. These findings are reflected in those of the international assessment, _Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) 2019_ [1], which suggest that the highest performing pupils in Ireland in Mathematics and Science are under-performing, relative to their peers in countries with similar overall performance.

Examples of good practice in differentiation, as noted in inspection reports, included pupils working together in pairs or small groups in a way that maximised learning for all and encouraged the development of key skills such as communicating and using language. Where there was scope to develop practice, inspectors frequently advised that teachers plan for the provision of differentiated learning, and make more effective use of assessment data to inform learning and the teaching approaches and strategies required. They also advised that teachers consider mechanisms through which differentiation practices could be shared within and between schools, and how a greater level of consistency of practice could be achieved.

---

1   Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) takes places every four years. The primary purpose of TIMSS is to gather high-quality data on students' levels of achievement in two key domains of study – Mathematics and Science – at both primary (fourth grade) and post-primary (eighth grade) levels.

Table 4.3: Quality of differentiation in primary and special schools and quality of in-class support for learning needs in primary schools: September 2016 - December 2020

	Differentiation is evident (Unannounced inspections)	In-class support for learning needs (Announced inspections)
Very good	16.3%	28.6%
Good	33.1%	40.3%
Satisfactory	34.3%	25.0%
Fair	13.8%	5.6%
Weak	2.5%	0.5%

There were high levels of enjoyment of learning and motivation evident among pupils

Pupils' enjoyment of learning and their motivation to engage in classroom activities were found to be good or very good in 86% of the lessons observed during whole-school and curriculum evaluations in primary schools and special schools (Table 4.4). This corresponds with the findings from the Inspectorate's surveys of pupils during whole school type evaluations in the September 2016 to December 2020 periods in which 81% of pupils agreed that they enjoy their lessons and learning.

Table 4.4: Pupils' enjoyment of learning and motivation in primary and special schools: September 2016 - December 2020

PUPILS ENJOY LEARNING AND ARE MOTIVATED	
Very Good	48.1%
Good	37.8%
Satisfactory	11.9%
Fair	2.0%
Poor	0.2%
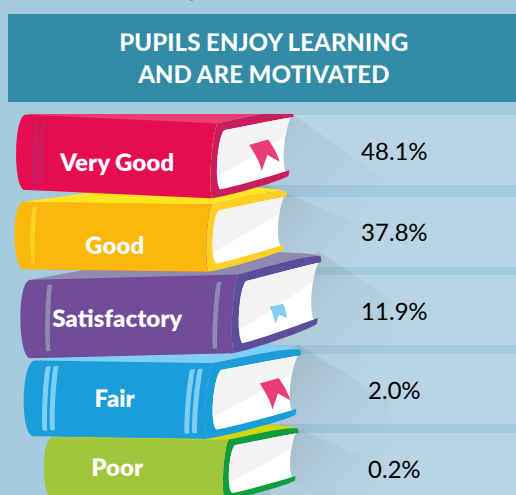
There is scope to create enhanced opportunities for collaborative learning

The curriculum at primary level suggests that learning experiences should provide opportunities for social interaction and collaboration between pupils. Findings from unannounced inspections in relation to how pupils were enabled to collaborate appropriately in their learning were mixed. Of the lessons observed, 69% made good or very good provision for pupils to learn through talk and discussion (Table 4.5). However, opportunities for pupils to collaborate in their learning were more limited. Inspection findings show that good or very good provision for pupil collaboration was made in just 59% of lessons while 14% of lessons observed did not have adequate provision for children to collaborate on learning tasks (Table 4.6).

Inspectorate research, which was carried out in November and December 2020, indicated that the range of measures put in place by schools to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 virus had impacted on opportunities for collaborative learning. Pupils, who participated in focus groups carried out by the Inspectorate in November 2020, advised of their concerns about fewer practical and collaborative learning activities. Similarly, in the Return to School survey administered by the Inspectorate in December 2020, just over one-third of teachers in primary schools who responded indicated that they continued to provide regular opportunities for pupils to work collaboratively during lessons.

Although schools were not required to implement social distancing measures in junior classes in primary schools, and pod structures were possible for senior primary pupils and also for older students in special schools, it appears that teachers were reluctant to provide opportunities for collaborative learning in classrooms from the time that schools first closed in March 2020. Subsequent guidance issued in March 2021 and August 2021[2] advised schools to re-establish collaborative learning opportunities, and it will continue to be important to build upon this in classrooms in the coming years.

2   Department of Education (2021) Returning to school: Guidance for teaching and learning Junior Infants-2nd class. Available at:
    https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/6a739-returning-to-school-guidance-for-teaching-and-learning-junior-infants-2nd-class/
    Department of Education (2021) Returning to school: Guidance for teaching and learning 3rd class-6th class. Available at:
    https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/ea4e2-returning-to-school-guidance-for-teaching-and-learning-3rd-class-6th-class/
Department of Education (2021) Curriculum guidance: Teaching, learning and assessment 2021/2022. Available at:
    https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/f9037-curriculum-guidance-teaching-learning-and-assessment-2021-2022/

Table 4.5: Provision of opportunities for pupils to learn through talk and discussion in primary and special schools: September 2016-December 2020

Rating	Percentage
Very Good	24.5%
Good	44.9%
Satisfactory	23.6%
Fair	6.2%
Poor	0.8%
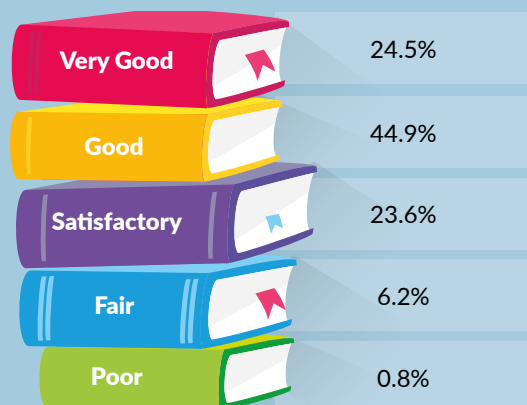
Table 4.6: Enabling pupils to work collaboratively in primary and special schools: September 2016-December 2020

Rating	Percentage
Very Good	22.3%
Good	36.6%
Satisfactory	27.1%
Fair	11.5%
Poor	2.5%

Many primary schools are making efforts to enhance learning by using play-based pedagogies in infant classes. Similar efforts are being made in junior classes in special schools. There is evidence of an erosion of play-based approaches as pupils progress through the school

Inspection findings indicate that many primary schools are making efforts to support and enhance learning in infant classes by using play-based approaches. Inspection findings also indicate that similar efforts are being made in junior classes in some special schools. However, there is also evidence that children experience these approaches less frequently as they progress beyond junior and senior infants in primary schools. Attempting to gain some of the benefits of *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*, some schools have decided to provide at least some Aistear-style opportunities by creating 'Aistear hours' in their timetables. Such an approach is at odds with the principles underpinning Aistear. These principles provide for the consistent embedding of children's learning in high-quality, interactive play experiences. A more comprehensive understanding of these principles and how they can be applied across the curriculum in infant classes would be beneficial for pupils' learning experiences and outcomes. Inspection findings have also highlighted that by the time young children are six or seven years old and enrolled in first class, their experience of school could be predominantly one of frequent whole-class teaching. While this approach may be used as part of a range of methodologies, an over-reliance on whole-class teaching can limit opportunities for child-to-child and child-to-adult engagement.

There is scope to enhance the impact of digital technologies in classrooms and settings

In surveys administered during the September 2016 to December 2020 period, just over half (54%) of primary pupils indicated that they used digital technologies during some lessons. These findings indicate that there remains potential to strengthen and embed pupils' use of digital technologies to support learning.

The experience of remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic heightened the importance of schools embracing the potential of digital technologies to facilitate and enhance learning. To support schools, the Department published *Guidance on Remote Learning in a COVID-19 Context: September–December 2020* and a number of circulars.[3] In line with *Circular 74/2020*, all schools were required to have a communications/learning platform in place. They were also advised to incorporate planning for remote learning into their digital planning, which would also facilitate provision in the context of remote learning if required. The PDST developed a range of supports for schools, including a *Blended Learning Toolkit* and a reflective tool for contingency planning. In addition to the €40m in grant funding issued in 2019-2020 to support the implementation of the *Digital Strategy for Schools 2015-2020*, a further €10m in funding was distributed that year; this was to support ICT requirements for remote teaching, including essential

---

3   Department of Education Circulars 0031/2020, 0032/2020 and 0074/2020.
    Available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/circulars/?organisation=department-of-education

learning platforms and other ICT infrastructure, and to assist schools to support pupils/students at risk of educational disadvantage arising from the COVID-19 closures.

While only 61% of the respondents to the parent survey administered during the first three weeks of school closures in April 2020 agreed with the statement: *My child uses digital technology to engage with the school with regard to his/her learning*, engagement with digital technologies increased considerably during the period of school closures. Inspectorate research in the September to December 2020[4] period indicated that the use of technology to support teaching, learning and assessment had evolved considerably. This is in line with findings in education systems worldwide where alternatives to face-to-face instruction had to be found. As a result, the online environment and other forms of digital communication were used by teachers, children and young people on an unprecedented scale.[5]

Findings from the Inspectorate research in Irish schools included the fact that teachers and school management had introduced or consolidated the use of online learning platforms to enable inclusive access and positive learning experiences. Schools also used their digital capabilities to good effect to support the learning of pupils at very high risk from contracting COVID-19, who had to continue their learning remotely in the September to December 2020 period. A key challenge for schools will be to build on the good practice established, and to capitalise fully on the potential of digital technologies to enhance teaching, learning and assessment in the years ahead.

There is scope to improve curriculum planning and preparation in a considerable proportion of primary schools and special schools

Some of the challenges concerning how well teachers cater for the varying needs of pupils and the lack of active and child-centred approaches may have their origins in weaknesses in curriculum planning and preparation by teachers. Findings from whole-school evaluations indicate that there is scope to improve curriculum planning in a considerable proportion of primary schools and special schools. The quality of curriculum planning was good or very good in just 67% of schools inspected, satisfactory in 25% of schools, and less than satisfactory in 7.7% of schools inspected (Table 4.7).

Table 4.7: Quality of curriculum planning in primary schools and special schools: September 2016-December 2020

Very Good	19.6%
Good	47.7%
Satisfactory	25.1%
Fair	6.4%
Poor	1.3%

4   The suite of return to school reports is available at https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/78605-return-to-school-summary-of-research-september-december-2020/
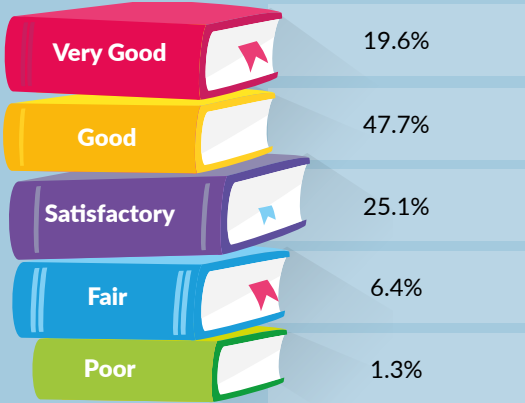
5   See, for example: OECD (2020) Strengthening online learning when schools are closed: The role of families and teachers in supporting students during the COVID-19 crisis. Available at: https://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/strengthening-online-learning-when-schools-are-closed-the-role-of-families-and-teachers-in-supporting-students-during-the-covid-19-crisis-c4ecba6c/

4.2.2 ASSESSMENT

Assessment continues to be a challenge in many primary schools and special schools

Inspection findings from this period indicate that there is a considerable need to develop assessment practices in primary schools and special schools. Schools received a quality rating for assessment of good or very good in 44% of unannounced inspections and 66% of announced inspections respectively (Table 4.8). However, the quality of assessment was just satisfactory in a substantial proportion of both unannounced (43%) and announced inspections (28%). The quality of assessment was less than satisfactory in 13% of unannounced inspections and 6% of announced inspections.

Table 4.8:   Quality of assessment in primary and special schools: September 2016 - December 2020

Quality of assessment	Unannounced inspections	Announced inspections
Very good	5.8%	11.5%
Good	37.8%	54.1%
Satisfactory	43.0%	28.1%
Fair	11.6%	6.0%
Weak	1.8%	0.3%

Assessment data needs to be used more effectively to inform teaching and learning

Summative assessments, including standardised tests, can help schools to evaluate pupils' progress and pinpoint areas for improvement. The assessment data can also support teachers in ensuring that learning experiences meet pupils' needs. Effective summative assessment is just one component in supporting learning at both classroom and whole-school level. It is important to use a range of assessment information when making decisions about a child's progress and achievement. Information from ability tests, teacher observations and parental reports, as well as the views of the pupils, are also very important aspects of a thorough assessment and should complement data from summative assessment, such as standardised test scores.[6]

Inspection findings during the period to which this report refers indicate that the use of summative assessment approaches, where individual teachers used a broad range of strategies to provide evidence of learning at specific points in the school year, was well established. It was evident, however, that the recording and communication to parents of assessment information about pupils' development and achievement, other than standardised test information, was inconsistent. Inspection findings also indicate that the use of assessment information to inform provision for the varying abilities of pupils was less well developed. In this regard, the value of using assessment information to guide the next steps in learning, to build on pupils' strengths, interests and dispositions and to plan further group and individual learning programmes was highlighted.

---

6 *National Council for Curriculum and Assessment Primary: Assessment-Standardised Testing.*
   Available at: https://ncca.ie/en/resources/standardised-testing/

Pupils require further opportunities to reflect on their progress as learners

The previous _Chief Inspector's Report (2016)_ highlighted the need to provide enhanced opportunities for pupils to reflect on their learning. However, pupils' responses to surveys[7] in the September 2016 to December 2020 period indicate that there has been little progress in respect of this recommendation. There is still a need for teachers to discuss with the children in their class how best to improve their learning. For example, in their responses to Inspectorate surveys during the period to which this report refers, 79% of pupils reported that they were doing well with reading while 18% reported that they did not know. These findings are similar to the last _Chief Inspector's Report (2016)_ (81% and 16% respectively) and suggest that teachers need to communicate more effectively with children regarding their strengths and where they need to improve. It is also vital that schools develop strategies to capture pupils' opinions on how they learn best and on what makes learning interesting for them.

---

7   _Surveys are administered as part of certain evaluations._

4.3 CURRICULUM PROVISION IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS AND SPECIAL SCHOOLS

4.3.1 ENGLISH

Progress in International Reading Literacy Study 8 (2016) highlights the very strong performance of Irish pupils in English reading

Of the 50 countries that participated in Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) in 2016, Ireland was among the top-performing ones. It is also encouraging to note that no other European Union (EU) or Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) country achieved a score in PIRLS that was significantly higher than Ireland's score, and that only one other country (Singapore) outperformed Ireland in the new online reading assessment: ePIRLS. Other positive findings include the fact that Irish pupils' overall reading achievement score improved since the previous cycle of the study (2011) and that the number of pupils in Ireland with only basic reading skills had dropped significantly. In addition, the gender gap in Ireland was smaller than the gap internationally, and it had narrowed significantly since 2011.

PIRLS 2016 found that, on average, and in almost every country, pupils who liked reading very much had higher average reading achievement than those who only somewhat liked reading and, in particular, those pupils who reported they did not like reading had the lowest average reading achievement. Irish pupils' reading attitudes were very similar to the average findings across all participating countries with slightly more (46%) reporting that they liked reading in comparison to the average (43%), and 15% reporting that they did not like reading, slightly below the international average (16%).
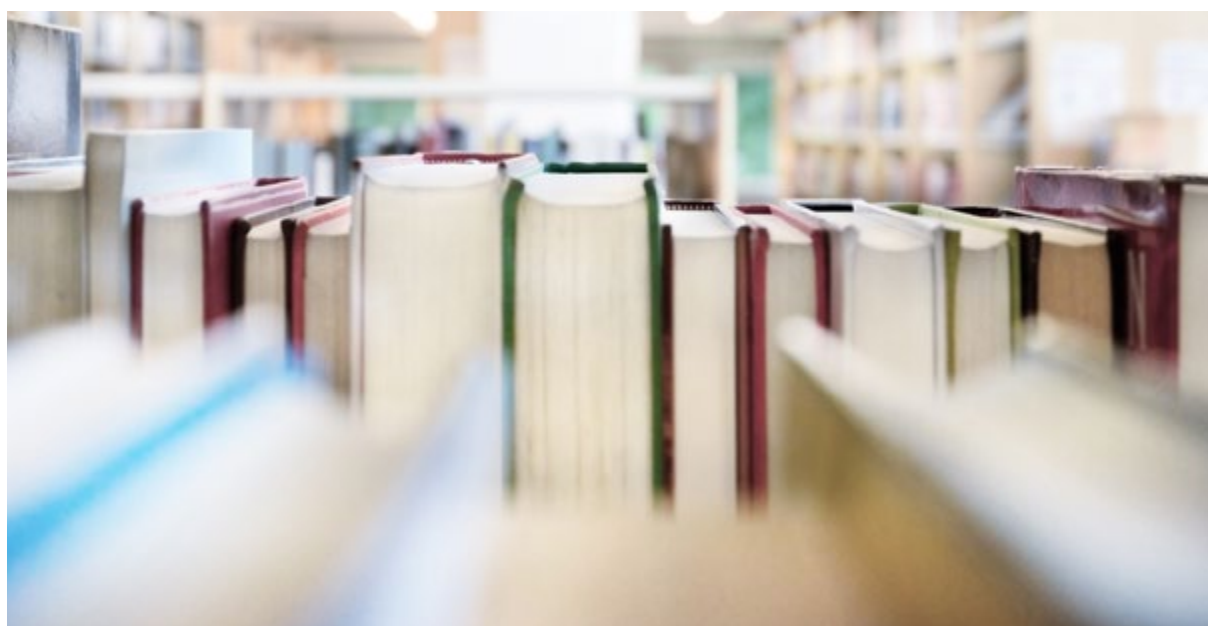
Findings from inspections on the quality of learning in literacy were generally positive, but there was potential to improve the attainment and experiences of pupils

Overall attainment of learning objectives in English lessons was deemed to be good or very good during announced inspections in 81% of primary schools and special schools; there was scope for development in almost a fifth (19%) of English lessons that were observed.

Pupils' levels of enjoyment and motivation in English lessons were found to be good or very good in 86% of the English lessons observed during announced inspections. On the other hand, in over a fifth (22%) of the English lessons observed during unannounced inspections, inspectors noted the potential for teachers to improve pupils' engagement with the learning task provided. A key message from inspections

---

8 *PIRLS is an international comparative assessment that measures student learning in reading at fourth grade. It has been administered every five years since 2001. In 2016, an assessment of online reading, 'ePIRLS', was administered for the first time.*

was that pupils should be provided with consistent opportunities to build on their language learning, and to develop their skills and enjoyment in using language effectively. Inspection findings also highlighted the importance of pupils being taught reading skills using texts that are at their instructional level.

Implementation of the national literacy and numeracy strategy impacted very positively on pupils' reading skills

The interim review of the implementation of the *National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy* in 2016 found that many of the targets for reading achievement among primary pupils that had been set in the strategy had been met in a little over half of the strategy's lifetime. In order to maintain focus to 2020, new targets were set including a target that 50% of sixth class pupils would perform at the highest levels in reading by 2020. In addition, to close the gap identified between schools with the highest concentrations of disadvantage and other schools, discrete new targets for pupils in Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) schools were set. These targets were linked directly to the *Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) Plan 2017*. They included a target that, by 2020, 27% of pupils in sixth class would be reading at or above the highest levels in English. The COVID-19 pandemic and the resultant closure of schools meant that the National Assessments of Mathematics and English Reading (NAMER), which had been scheduled in 2020, were postponed to May 2021 so, at the time of writing, data was not available to monitor this target.

Systematic planning at whole-school level is important in supporting the development of pupils' writing skills across a range of genres

Inspection findings, during the period to which this report refers, indicate that where a systematic and incremental whole-school approach to writing is followed, it supports pupils to develop writing skills progressively across a range of genres. The provision of constructive feedback and the enabling of pupils to revise their draft texts contributed significantly to the quality of published texts and was a feature of effective practice observed. Other features of good practice observed by inspectors included the enabling of pupils to engage in experiences such as shared writing and the *Write a Book Project.*

However, in some instances, insufficient systematic planning hindered the incremental approach required for teaching the writing process, or limited the writing genres with which the pupils engaged in primary schools and special schools. Inspection findings also indicated that insufficient use was made of digital technology to facilitate both the revision and editing stages of the writing process.

Co-curricular and cross-curricular activities are supportive of pupils' literacy learning. Extra-curricular activities have the potential to support pupils' learning and wellbeing beyond the curriculum

During the period to which this report refers, inspection findings highlighted the very powerful contribution that cross-curricular activities can make to pupils' overall language development. Many inspection reports commented positively on pupils' engagement with co-curricular [9] or cross-curricular activities[10] that supported literacy. Inspectors also commended the development of classroom and school libraries. Such an emphasis on the promotion of reading for pleasure supports research findings on the significant benefits of reading for pupils' overall literacy proficiency. In addition, inspectors found that the provision of extra-curricular[11] activities by schools was useful in supporting pupils' wellbeing, learning and skill development beyond the scope of the curriculum.

Because of the potential of co-curricular and cross curricular activities to enhance pupils' learning experiences and develop their skills, there is a need to look more systematically at how such broader activities are supported or provided for pupils. The *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework* (2020) proposes a learning outcomes-based approach to teaching and learning. This has the potential to support teachers in

---

9   Co-curricular activities in the most part are provided by teachers, but are often supported by appropriately vetted external tutors working under the direction of the class teacher. They take place within the normal school day and typically incur no additional cost to the parents/guardians of pupils.

10 Cross-curricular activities involve the development of skills and concepts across a range of subject areas under the same general theme. They take place within the normal school day as part of the integrated learning experiences and opportunities provided by teachers for pupils.

11 Extra-curricular activities are generally provided by teachers or appropriately vetted external tutors from the local community outside of classroom time (for example at lunch-time, after school or in school holiday periods) and are delivered to enhance learning in areas outside of the formal curriculum. These activities include but are not limited to sporting, musical, artistic and technology-based programmes.

designing useful co-curricular activities to support pupils' learning experiences. In addition, the framework proposes that subject areas become more integrated, especially for younger pupils, thus enhancing the range of opportunities for cross-curricular activities. The Department's Curriculum and Assessment Policy Unit and the Inspectorate are currently examining the area of extra-curricular activities with a view to developing guidance for schools to support them in their provision in this regard.

There is greater recognition by teachers of the role of playful learning in approaches to literacy in primary schools and special schools

Whole-school evaluation (WSE) reports in primary schools for the September 2016 to December 2020 period indicate that teachers recognised the importance of engagement with *Aistear* and the potential of playful pedagogies to influence the experiences of children in infant classes in literacy. Teachers of junior classes in special schools were also found to recognise the value of playful learning.

Key successes observed in curriculum evaluations in English included the positive impact of the use of Aistear on the development of pupils' literacy skills. Where best practice was noted, Aistear was used purposefully to embed the *Primary Language Curriculum/Curaclam Teanga na Bunscoile* (PLC/CTB) by providing opportunities for pupils to extend their vocabulary, and to use and transfer new language content and skills in a variety of meaningfully rich contexts. While the overall picture is positive, there is scope for further development of the use of Aistear and playful pedagogies in order to develop language and early literacy skills, and to progress learning.

4.3.2 IRISH

The quality of language use in Gaeltacht primary schools and in gaelscoileanna was good overall, with scope to develop pupils' academic language

Inspection findings during the September 2016 to December 2020 period demonstrate that the quality of language use in Gaeltacht primary schools and gaelscoileanna was good overall. Since 2017, the systematic development and enrichment of pupils' proficiency in Irish in Gaeltacht primary schools has been progressed through the implementation of language-based criteria under *The Gaeltacht School Recognition Scheme.* Pupils were motivated to speak Irish through the use of school-based initiatives and, in general, they expressed themselves with fluency and confidence. Inspectors advised that further emphasis on the discrete teaching of subject-specific vocabulary, particularly in Mathematics, was required to support pupils' language learning in some Gaeltacht schools inspected.

In most gaelscoileanna where evaluations took place during this period, pupils displayed a positive disposition towards the language, demonstrated an appropriate level of fluency in Irish, and were afforded opportunities to participate in worthwhile co-curricular and extra-curricular activities. Inspectors recommended that teachers develop pupils' awareness of themselves as language learners through the greater use of self-assessment, and make greater use of digital technology to support relevant and meaningful learning experiences.

In the majority of these schools, inspectors reported that there was scope to develop pupils' academic, cognitive and social language to enable them to use the language more independently, confidently and creatively. The inspection findings suggest that schools should make further use of school self-evaluation and assessment processes to develop pupils' literacy and communication skills in Irish to support their accurate use of the language.

Pupils' learning outcomes in Irish in English-medium primary schools remain very concerning

In 2016, the *Chief Inspector's Report* had noted a slight deterioration in learning outcomes in Irish for pupils at primary level since the publication of the previous *Chief Inspector's Report* in 2013. Data relating to learning in Irish in English-medium primary schools between September 2016 and December 2020 shows that pupils' learning outcomes in Irish are still of concern.

During the 2016 to 2020 period, inspectors found that pupils' attainment of learning objectives was good or very good in just 67% of Irish lessons evaluated during WSE, WSE-MLL and curriculum evaluations in English-medium primary schools. The quality of learning outcomes was noted to be good or very good in just 72% of lessons observed during unannounced inspections. Overall, across a range of inspection models, inspectors found that there was scope to improve the quality of pupils' learning in 33% (announced inspections) and 28% (unannounced inspections) of lessons observed. During their engagements with inspectors in 2020, schools highlighted that children's learning in Irish had suffered disproportionately as a result of the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. In particular, it was noted that there was insufficient opportunity for children to communicate through Irish and to develop their language skills in meaningful communicative contexts.

While teachers make good efforts to provide suitable learning experiences in Irish, more fun and engaging Irish language learning activities need to be provided

Inspection findings from curriculum evaluations of Irish in English-medium schools show that many teachers worked to provide pupils with a wide range of language-rich games and activities to stimulate their interest in the language. Successes included the positive attitude to Irish evident during pupil focus-group interviews. In these interviews, pupils highlighted their enjoyment of co-curricular language activities and the value they placed on being able to recite songs and poems in Irish. Where effective pedagogical practice was noted, inspectors typically praised the use of Irish as the language of communication in the classroom.

Although these findings are encouraging, there remains a need to create language learning experiences that are more engaging and enjoyable. In almost a quarter (24%) of lessons evaluated during announced inspections, inspectors found that pupils' engagement in learning during Irish lessons was less than good. In a quarter of the lessons, inspectors noted the potential to improve the quality of pupils' enjoyment and motivation further in Irish lessons.

There is a need for an increased focus on the development of pupils' communication skills in Irish

During inspections, inspectors observed an over-reliance on translation from Irish to English as part of the pupils' experience of Irish. They also highlighted the need for teachers to create more opportunities for pupils to speak Irish individually and naturally in a sustained manner. While pupils were typically able to use basic language structures and to ask and answer questions that were relevant to the specific lesson content, they experienced notable difficulties in transferring this new language to other communicative scenarios. This is due largely to the insufficient provision of opportunities to practise the language in pairs and small groups on a regular basis. In many cases, pupils experienced difficulties in constructing sentences and using verbs independently. Inspectors also observed that pupils generally experienced an overly-narrow range of writing, with limited opportunities to write for different audiences and in different genres.

4.3.3 MATHEMATICS

Ireland's pupils are ranked highly in Mathematics in the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (2019) [12]

Ireland was among 64 countries that took part in the _Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study_ (TIMSS) study in 2019. Primary pupils in Ireland scored significantly above the TIMSS scale centrepoint in Mathematics and no other European Union (EU) country performed better than Ireland. As Ireland's results were very similar to 2015, this indicates that the significant improvement noted in the 2011 results has been maintained. Other key findings include that boys and girls at fourth class performed equally well in Mathematics, lower-achieving pupils in Ireland performed significantly better than the average of pupils in all countries taking the TIMSS test, and results showed equity in terms of schools' performance generally. Nevertheless, the findings suggest that pupils in Ireland with exceptional ability in Mathematics are underperforming, relative to their peers in countries with similar overall performance.

Findings from inspections on the quality of learning in Mathematics were generally positive, although scope for improvement remained

Inspectors' findings on the quality of learning in Mathematics in primary and special schools were positive in some respects. It is encouraging that the overall quality of pupils' learning in Mathematics was found to be good or very good in 95% of announced curriculum evaluations.

Overall attainment of learning objectives in mathematics lessons was found to be good or very good during 84% of announced inspections in primary and special schools. Pupils' levels of enjoyment and motivation in mathematics lessons were found to be good or very good in 87% of the mathematics lessons observed during announced inspections.

Nonetheless, inspection findings indicated that there is need to improve pupils' engagement with their learning. In almost a quarter (24%) of the mathematics lessons observed during unannounced inspections, inspectors noted the potential for teachers to improve pupils' engagement with the learning task provided.

12 Economic Social and Research Institute (ESRI) (2018) The health of 9 year olds-Growing Up in Ireland. Available at: https://www.growingup.ie/pubs/No%204%20The%20Health%20of%209%20Year%20Olds.pdf

Pupils reached the targets set for Mathematics in the national literacy and numeracy strategy well in advance of the scheduled target date of 2020

The *Interim Review of the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy* completed in 2016 found that good progress had been made in meeting the targets that had been set for Mathematics. Consequently, targets to 2020 were revised, in particular where achievements were already at, or near, the benchmark set in 2011. Although specific targets for numeracy in disadvantaged schools had not been included in the original strategy, these were now set. For example, a target was set to increase, by 2020, the number of sixth class pupils in DEIS Band 1 urban primary schools performing at, or above, level 3 in the NAMER at sixth class to 27%.[13]

Learning experiences in Mathematics should be challenging, situated in real-life contexts, and promote talk and discussion

In schools where positive pupil outcomes and experiences in Mathematics were observed, inspectors praised pupils' high levels of engagement in enquiry-based learning, their ability to communicate their mathematical learning, and to relate this learning to their personal lives and to the wider environment. In their advice to schools where the pupils' learning outcomes and experiences required development, inspectors identified the need for learning experiences to be suitably challenging and better informed by assessment data. In some instances, inspectors noted an over-reliance on textbooks and the fact that learning opportunities were not adequately contextualised to pupils' needs and experiences. The need for pupils to experience meaningful mathematical learning in real-life contexts was also noted regularly.

In 35% of the lessons evaluated during unannounced inspections, inspectors found that the opportunities for pupils to talk and discuss their mathematical learning were less than good. This finding merits particular consideration given the critical role played by language in developing mathematical thinking. Inspection findings also indicate that there is scope to make greater use of assessment information to inform the provision for differentiated teaching and learning, and to monitor and track the impact of any whole-school initiatives in Mathematics.

A significant proportion of pupils were unsure of their progress in reading and Mathematics

In surveys administered during whole-school evaluations during the September 2016 to December 2020 period, over a sixth (18%) of pupils indicated that they did not know how they were doing in reading. Similarly, a fifth (20%) of pupils responded that they did not know how they were doing in Mathematics. This is broadly similar to the findings from the previous *Chief Inspector's Report* (2016) where 16% of pupils reported that they did not know how they were doing in reading and just under a fifth (18%) indicated that they did not know how they were doing in Mathematics.

---

13 Due to COVID-19, NAMER testing did not take place in 2020, but was adapted and rescheduled for May 2021.

4.3.4 SOCIAL, ENVIRONMENTAL AND SCIENTIFIC EDUCATION (SESE) IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

Within the _Primary Curriculum_ (1999), _Social, Environmental and Scientific Education_ (SESE) is presented under three subject headings: History, Geography and Science. The SESE curriculum enables children to explore, investigate and develop an understanding of local and wider environments.

TIMSS (2019) indicates that the performance of Irish pupils has remained stable and strong in Science

In _TIMSS 2019_, the performance of fourth class pupils in Ireland in Science was significantly above the TIMSS scale centrepoint. The performance of Irish pupils on the science assessment was very similar to that seen in TIMSS 2015; however, it was significantly higher than in 2011. The results also show equity in terms of schools' performance generally, and the difference in achievement in Science between boys and girls in Ireland at fourth class was not statistically significant.

Despite these positive findings, twelve countries significantly outperformed Ireland in Science and four EU countries had significantly higher mean science scores than Ireland, while the science performance of eight EU countries was similar to Ireland's science performance. The findings suggest that the highest performing pupils in Ireland in Science are underperforming, relative to their peers in countries with similar overall performance.

While inspection findings on provision for Social, Environmental and Scientific Education were positive overall, there was scope for improvement in the use of digital technologies, higher-order skill development and assessment practices

Inspection reports from the September 2016 to December 2020 period referred positively to the very high standard of pupils' learning experiences in SESE, and praised pupils' very high levels of enjoyment and motivation in this curriculum area. Reports also pointed to the strong emphasis placed on developing cross-curricular links across discrete subject areas.

Inspectors found that History lessons generally provided for a good balance between content and the development of historical investigative skills; in particular, teachers made very good use of old photographs and artefacts to develop pupils' skills in using evidence. It was noted that teachers made very good provision for the curriculum strand, _Myself and my family_, and that many fifth and sixth class

teachers embraced the potential of this decade of centenaries to enhance teaching and learning in the curriculum strand, *Politics, conflict and society*. Inspection findings indicated that there was potential to further develop pupils' knowledge of local history, and their use of digital technologies to research and present projects.

In Geography, inspectors commended effective integration with other curriculum areas, for example English, History, Visual Arts, and Science. Strengths also included the use of project work to promote pupils' investigative skills and to develop their knowledge and understanding of other countries. Inspection findings indicated that there was scope to develop pupils' knowledge of the geographical features of their local area further. Overall, classroom environments and displays supported and reinforced learning effectively. In some schools, inspectors suggested that further use of maps, globes and atlases would enhance the development of pupils' mapping skills.

In Science, inspection findings indicated that schools made balanced provision for the acquisition of knowledge and the development of skills. Inspectors noted strengths in the development of pupils' observing, recording and communicating skills, but suggested that teachers make greater provision for the development of pupils' skills in questioning and analysing. While inspection findings indicated that growing provision was made for guided experiments and investigations, they also indicated that the provision for open-ended investigations and child-led investigations was less well developed. Inspectors commended schools' participation in national and regional science projects and events. In their advice to schools, inspectors also suggested that increased emphasis be placed on designing and making activities, with greater provision made for the exploration of materials before embarking on projects.

During the period to which this report refers, the Department's *Education for Sustainable Development Action Plan 2014-2020* was published. While most schools engaged in the *Green Schools Project* and encouraged pupils to care for the environment, inspection findings indicated that there was scope to make more explicit connections between this valuable work and the concept of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD). Some schools were commended for promoting ESD through for example, outdoor classrooms, engagement in junior tidy-towns, and projects such as school gardens. Overall, inspection findings indicated that there was need to support schools in their understanding and promotion of ESD.

In SESE, inspectors consistently referred to the need for digital technologies to feature more prominently in pupils' learning experiences. While inspectors were positive overall about the quality of teachers' assessment practices in SESE, they often noted the predominance of teacher-led tasks and tests as modes of assessment, and the need to develop pupil self-assessment and other assessment for learning approaches.

4.3.5 ARTS EDUCATION

Arts Education comprises three curriculum subjects: Visual Arts, Music and Drama. The curriculum is designed to enable children to explore and express ideas, feelings and experiences through the visual arts, music and drama. While creativity, innovation and critical thinking skills are important elements of pupils' learning across the curriculum, they are intrinsic elements of the Arts curriculum. The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) has been working to ensure that creativity is reflected in recently developed curricular frameworks, and being creative is recognised as a key skill in the draft Primary Curriculum Framework.

All recognised schools are eligible to apply to participate in the *Creative Ireland* project. Participating schools are supported to develop and celebrate their engagement with the arts and to bring about real change in the way they work. They can draw on the range of resources within their school and wider community, and develop new ways of working that reinforce the impact of creativity on pupils learning, development and wellbeing.

The quality of teaching and learning was found to be good or very good in Arts Education; there was scope to develop pupils' creativity further

Findings from curriculum evaluations in Visual Art, Music and Drama during the September 2016 to December 2020 period indicate that, the overall quality of teaching and the overall quality of learning was either good or very good. In curriculum evaluations and whole-school evaluations, the quality of pupil engagement and enjoyment was good or very good in 91% of lessons observed. Pupils' motivation levels were good or very good in 93% of lessons observed. Pupils' attainment of lesson objectives was good or very good in 86% of lessons, and the use of suitable teaching approaches was good or very good in 84% of lessons. Inspection findings highlighted examples of highly-skilled teaching and the provision of enjoyable and rich learning experiences during arts education lessons.

In Visual Arts, inspection findings noted strengths in the strands of *Drawing*, and *Paint and colour*. Inspectors commended teachers' use of the work of local artists and local art centres to enhance the experience for pupils. Where aspects of the Visual Arts required improvement, common themes included the need for teachers to focus on the development of pupils' individual creativity, and to make greater use of digital technologies, for example online gallery visits and pupil e-portfolios. Inspectors also highlighted the need to place an additional emphasis on pupils' ability to use subject-specific terminology independently.

In Music, inspection findings indicated that pupils were generally enabled to sing a range of songs to a high standard. Schools made good provision overall for the *Performance* strand, enabling pupils to engage in whole-school musical productions and other performances. The expansion of the *Music Generation* programme has enabled participating schools to avail of the expertise of specialist tutors and access to a broader range of musical instruments. In general, inspectors noted that the pupils had less opportunity to engage in the *Composing* strand of the curriculum. Despite the restrictions placed on schools during COVID-19, they adapted and managed to deliver a music programme that included a greater focus on listening and responding to music, making music and singing outdoors.

In Drama, inspectors regularly noted strengths in *Exploring and making drama*, and *Co-operating and communicating in making drama*. In particular, developing make-believe play into drama and the process of exploring life through the creation of plot, theme, fiction and make-believe were identified as positive aspects of provision. To deepen pupils' learning, inspectors recommended placing increased emphasis on the strand unit, *Reflecting on drama*.

4.3.6 PHYSICAL EDUCATION

The *Physical Education* (PE) curriculum is divided into six strands: Athletics, Dance, Gymnastics, Games, Outdoor and adventure activities and Aquatics. These strands provide for a broad and balanced physical development experience for children. PE also makes an important contribution to the physical and mental wellbeing of children.

The need for quality PE provision in schools is highlighted by the finding in the *Growing up in Ireland* (GUI) study (2018) of a significant underachievement of physical activity targets by young children. The study found that only one-quarter of nine-year-olds reported being physically active for at least sixty minutes every single day–the World Health Organisation recommended level of activity for children.[14] Programmes such as the *Active School Flag* (ASF) are designed to recognise schools and communities that strive towards achieving a physically educated and physically active school community. Schools that are involved in these initiatives provide a quality programme for all pupils and for promoting physical activity across the whole school community. A strength of the ASF process is the number of schools that choose to re-engage with the process every year. During the September 2016 to December 2019 period, there was an increase in the number of primary schools participating in the ASF, with 204 flags awarded to primary schools in 2016/17 and 299 in 2018/19. The award of flags in 2019/20 was impacted by COVID-19; however, 73 flags were awarded that year.

While inspectors were positive about pupils' learning in physical education lessons observed, there was a need to ensure that all aspects of the curriculum were developed fully

Overall, findings were very positive about the quality of provision in PE in primary schools and special schools. This is reassuring given the findings of the GUI study. Attainment of learning objectives was good or very good in 91% of lessons observed during announced inspections.

Inspectors found pupils' engagement and enjoyment levels to be very high in PE lessons and praised the strong emphasis placed on active learning. Where practice was most effective, inspectors noted a clear focus on the development of relevant PE skills which pupils were enabled to apply during subsequent lesson activities.

Many schools availed of the expertise of external tutors to support their delivery of curriculum strands. In some instances, this resulted in an imbalance in the allocation of time to certain strands. While most schools made very good provision for games, overall, insufficient emphasis was placed on the progressive development of skills in the strands of *Dance*, and *Outdoor and adventure activities*. To this end, inspection findings suggested that upskilling of teachers would support a more balanced approach to the delivery of the curriculum. The development of pupils' transferable physical literacy skills tended to be very good where teachers were trained for and implemented the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST) *Fundamental Movement Skills* programme. While some schools provided a comprehensive programme in *Aquatics*, there was room for others to improve their provision for this important curriculum strand.

On the re-opening of schools, the repurposing of classrooms impacted on available space for indoor PE, and restrictions on the use of swimming pools impacted on the delivery of the Aquatics strand

In their responses to Inspectorate surveys administered as part of WSE inspections in the September 2016 to December 2020 period, 92% of parents agreed/strongly agreed with the statement, 'My child has a PE lesson each week'. In April 2020, during the early stages of school closures because of COVID-19, the Inspectorate conducted a survey of parents in collaboration with the National Parents' Council (Primary). Of the 8.053 parents who responded, 93% indicated that, since schools had closed, their child was taking regular exercise and was engaging in active play.

---

14 *Economic Social and Research Institute (ESRI) (2018) The health of 9 year olds-Growing Up in Ireland.*
   Available at: https://www.growingup.ie/pubs/No%204%20The%20Health%20of%209%20Year%20Olds.pdf

A key challenge for some schools on their re-opening in September 2020, following an extended period of school closures due to COVID-19, was the lack of available space for indoor PE lessons; a number of principals who engaged in research with the Inspectorate described how school halls had been variously repurposed as classrooms, staffrooms or storage areas, and the resultant challenges caused by the lack of available space for PE. While no specific guidance on the implementation of the PE curriculum at primary level or in special schools was provided, schools were advised to make greater use of the outdoors for learning across the curriculum, including for PE, and to provide for frequent opportunities for pupils to be active and engaged in movement and physical activity. Additionally, the use of external coaches to support the PE curriculum remained a decision for individual boards of management. However, schools were not in a position to provide swimming lessons as part of the *Aquatics* strand due to restrictions on the use of swimming pools.

4.3.7 SOCIAL, PERSONAL AND HEALTH EDUCATION

Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) provides particular opportunities to foster the personal development, health and wellbeing of the individual child, to help him/her to create and maintain supportive relationships and become an active and responsible citizen in society.
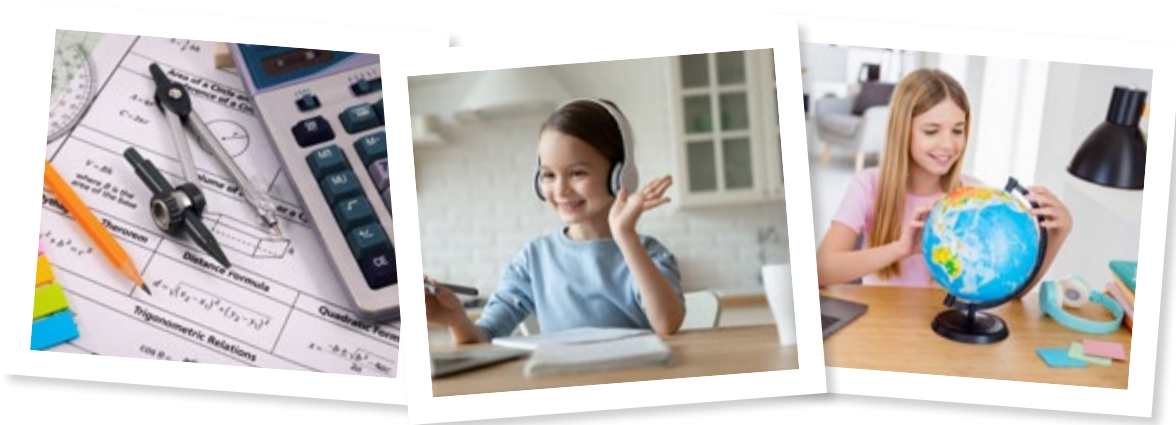
The overall findings in relation to provision for SPHE were positive but approaches to assessment require attention

The overall findings from inspections and surveys in relation to SPHE were positive. The quality of teaching approaches was good or very good in 81% of lessons observed during announced inspections. Inspection findings indicated good and very good levels of pupil engagement (86%), and enjoyment and motivation (87%) in lessons. Inspection reports in SPHE frequently referenced the positive, welcoming atmosphere and the respectful and caring relationships that existed in schools. Findings from child protection and safeguarding inspections (CPSIs), which commenced in February 2019, indicated that the quality of planning for and implementation of the SPHE curriculum and the *Stay Safe programme* was good or very good in 78% of primary schools during initial CPSIs, and in 88% of primary schools during final CPSIs.

Inspection findings also suggested that there was potential to improve aspects of teaching and assessment in SPHE, particularly the development of approaches to assessment and the enhancement of pupils' ability to use subject-specific language to discuss their learning with confidence.

Effective practices were prevalent in relation to wellbeing. Pupils demonstrated well-developed understanding of personal safety and bullying

Inspection findings pointed to the effective promotion of pupils' understanding in relation to healthy living and their self-confidence and self-esteem. Key successes observed also included the pupils' well-developed understanding of personal safety and bullying.

The *Anti-Bullying Procedures for Primary and Post-primary Schools 2013* highlight the importance of school culture in preventing and tackling bullying.[15] Data from surveys administered during whole-school inspections from September 2016 to December 2020 pointed to high levels of positivity among pupils and parents in relation to key wellbeing indicators such as enjoying school, feeling safe and cared for, and feeling that the pupils are being treated with respect. In their responses to the Inspectorate survey, almost all pupils agreed that there were clear rules in their school in relation to bullying, that they had learned about different kinds of bullying, and that if someone was bullying them they could get help from a teacher or other adult in the school (Table 4.9). In their responses to the Inspectorate survey, 89% of parents reported that they had been informed of the school's anti-bullying policy, and 92% asserted that they knew who to approach if their child experienced bullying. These positive findings are corroborated by the *Growing Up in Ireland* study which reported that socio-emotional and behavioural wellbeing among nine-year-olds in 2017 was relatively high.[16]

Table 4.9:   Pupils responses (in %) to questions related to bullying Primary: September 2016-March 2020

	Yes	Don't Know	No
In this school there are clear rules against hurting each other by what we say or do	94.1%	4.9%	1.0%
In school I have learned about different kinds of bullying	90.6%	5.6%	3.8%
If someone is bullying me I can get help from a teacher or other adult in the school	93.2%	5.2%	1.6%

Promoting pupil wellbeing was an important element of the successful return to school after COVID-19

The guidance documents made available by the Department to schools in preparation for their reopening in September 2020, after the period of closures due to COVID-19, emphasised that priority be given to activities to support the wellbeing of pupils and students. To support the wellbeing of school communities, the Department's National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) psychologists developed advice and a range of resources for parents, students and school staff.[17]

Research conducted by the Inspectorate in the autumn term of 2020 indicated that promoting the wellbeing of school communities was an important element of the successful return to school in September 2020. Most primary teachers (85%) considered that schools were supporting pupils' wellbeing. Similarly, parents expressed high levels of satisfaction with the supports available from schools for the wellbeing of their child(ren) during this period. Almost all primary pupils (93%) confirmed that they knew who to approach in school if they needed help. During the focus groups that inspectors conducted with pupils in September and November 2020, a key message from pupils was that school was very important in terms of their wellbeing and their socialisation as well as their learning.

15 *The Anti-bullying Procedures for Primary and Post-primary Schools 2013 define bullying as unwanted negative behaviour, verbal, psychological or physical conducted by an individual or group against another person (or persons) and which is repeated over time.*

16 *ESRI (2018) Growing up in Ireland- Cohort '08 at 9 Years Old. Available at: https://www.esri.ie/publications/growing-up-in-ireland-health-and-physical-development*

17 *These resources from NEPS are available at https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/af24b-wellbeing-guidance-documents-for-parents-students-and-schools/?referrer=http://www.gov.ie/en/publication/0722b-wellbeing-resources/*

4.4 KEY MESSAGES

Achievement

- Irish pupils continued to perform at a high level in international assessments in literacy, Mathematics and Science.

Teaching approaches

- High quality teaching approaches were observed in a majority of lessons.

- Planning and practice in catering for the range of pupil abilities and learning dispositions require further development and should include more active and child-centred teaching approaches.

- In response to COVID-19, there has been a considerable increase in the use of digital technologies in teaching and learning.

Assessment

- While there have been improvements in assessment in many primary schools, particularly in aspects of literacy and numeracy; challenges remain in relation to the implementation of approaches to assessment.

- There is a need for teachers to provide pupils with clearer feedback on their work and on how best to improve their learning, and to enable them to reflect on their learning.

Provision for Irish

- In Gaeltacht primary schools and gaelscoileanna, the quality of language use in Irish was good overall.

- There remains considerable scope to develop pupils' learning outcomes, motivation and engagement in Irish in English-medium schools.

Other curriculum provision

- In SESE, teachers make balanced provision for knowledge acquisition and the development of skills. There remains scope to develop pupils' higher-order investigative skills.

- There is a need to support schools in their understanding and promotion of ESD.

- There are positive findings in relation to wellbeing and the development of children's understanding of personal safety and bullying in SPHE.

- In the Arts, there are examples of enjoyable and rich learning experiences. There is scope to promote pupils' creativity and reflection further

4.5 LOOKING FORWARD

Teaching approaches

- To ensure that all pupils are challenged sufficiently, teachers should develop their approaches to differentiation further.
- To further extend learning beyond the acquisition of knowledge, greater focus should be placed in settings and schools on the development of skills and on fostering dispositions for learning
- Greater attention to the development and embedding of whole-school assessment strategies is required. Pupils should be provided with more frequent and enhanced opportunities to reflect on their progress as learners.

Language learning

- Pupils' opportunities for language learning and development should be extended more consistently through the use of active and collaborative learning opportunities across all curricular areas.

There is a need for primary schools to receive intensive support to enable them to introduce appropriately challenging, targeted interventions to enhance pupils' attainment and engagement, enjoyment and motivation in Irish language learning

Learning from the pandemic

Learning from the pandemic should be built on; particular with regard to the use of digital technologies in teaching and learning, and in supporting and enhancing communication with parents and their involvement in their child's education.

Co-curricular, cross-curricular and extracurricular activities

- There is need to explore how the Primary Curriculum Framework can be implemented in a manner that enables schools to extend and embed the provision of effective co-curricular and cross-curricular activities for pupils.
- There is a need to more systematically support schools in their provision of extra-curricular activities in light of the potential of these activities to support pupils' social and emotional development and to extend learning experiences and skills development beyond the curriculum.

5

The Quality of Teaching and Learning in Post-Primary Schools

5.1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents the key findings of inspections conducted in post-primary schools from September 2016 to December 2020. During this period, the _National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People_, which had been introduced in 2011, became well embedded and revised targets were introduced in 2017. The phased introduction of the new Junior Cycle, introduced in 2014, continued.

Due to COVID-19 and in line with public health advice, post-primary schools were closed without notice on 13 March 2020 and did not re-open until August/September 2020. During the challenging March-June 2020 period, extensive work was undertaken by post-primary schools in mediating the curriculum and facilitating learning for students, primarily through digital learning. School management and teachers also cooperated with revised assessment arrangements for Junior Cycle and Leaving Certificate students when the state examinations could not be held, as planned, in June 2020. Final examinations for Junior Cycle students were replaced with school-based assessments. Teachers and school management collaborated with the Department in the collection and moderation of estimated marks for the Calculated Grades process that the Minister for Education had put in place for Leaving Certificate students. Schools also embraced the very considerable challenges of re-opening, and ensuring that teaching and learning could continue during the ongoing public health restrictions in September-December 2020.

This chapter draws from data gathered during announced inspections, including whole-school evaluations: management, leadership and learning (WSE-MLL) and subject inspections. It also draws from data gathered during incidental inspections; these inspections, which are typically unannounced, involve the observation of teaching and learning in a number of lessons over the course of a school day. During the period September 2016 to December 2020, 6,288 lessons were observed in the course of WSE-MLL inspections and 4,807 lessons during subject inspections. Inspectors also evaluated the quality of teaching and learning, and engaged with students about their learning in 2,530 lessons during incidental inspections. In all lesson observations, a key focus was on evaluating the quality of the learning experience of students.

This chapter also draws on the findings from the Inspectorate's advisory engagements with schools, and on research conducted by the Inspectorate on the experience of remote teaching and learning from March-June 2020 when schools were closed. It also includes findings from Inspectorate research on how well schools were operating from September-December 2020 when schools re-opened.

Context

PISA 2018
Ireland is ranked **4th out of 36** OECD countries in reading literacy

TIMSS 2019
Ireland is the top performing EU country in 2nd year Mathematics

PISA 2018
Students in Ireland are less likely than students in other OECD countries to use digital devices in the classroom

The Junior Cycle Framework
continued its phased roll-out in schools

Schools were closed for lengthy periods due to the **COVID-19 pandemic**

Inspections and reports

Teaching
Good or very good in
92%
of inspections

Learning
Good or very good in
90%
of inspections

Assessment
Good or very good in
71%
of inspections

Opportunities for talk and discussion
Good or very good in
71%
of lessons

Catering for the range of learning needs
Effective in **64%** of lessons during unannounced inspections and **73%** of lessons during announced inspections

Learning environments
High quality in
85%
of lessons

Learning was good or very good in:

76% of inspections of Irish, compared with

87% of inspections of English and

91% of inspections of Mathematics

Irish

English

Maths

Surveys of students during whole-school evaluations

- **63%** of students found their classes interesting
- **54%** of students reported regular use of digital technology in lessons
- **63%** of students agreed that teachers talk to them about how to improve their learning

Key messages

Teaching and learning in post-primary schools is of a high standard

There is scope to improve outcomes for more able students

Students need further opportunities to learn collaboratively

Better learning of Irish can be achieved through more active engagement with creative and stimulating tasks and activities

Inspection findings indicate that the overall quality of teaching and learning in post-primary schools was of a high standard. Initial findings regarding the implementation of Junior Cycle reform were also positive. Nonetheless, inspectors found that there was scope to enhance students' learning through increased provision for talk, discussion and collaborative learning. The need to improve the use of assessment information to inform teaching and learning in classrooms and schools was also identified during inspections.

5.2 TEACHING, LEARNING AND ASSESSMENT

5.2.1 PROGRAMMES

The continued implementation of the Junior Cycle Framework has led to positive developments in classroom practices; the sharing of good practices among teachers will be a key factor in maintaining momentum

One of the major changes in post-primary education over the period covered by this report has been the continued implementation of the _Junior Cycle Framework_, with the various subject specifications being rolled out on a phased basis. With all of the subject specifications now in place, it is timely to look at some of the emerging findings from inspections in relation to how the roll-out of the framework has impacted on classroom and planning practices.

Inspection findings show that group work has become much more prevalent in lessons. This is a very welcome development as group work can facilitate more active learning, deeper engagement with subject matter and the improvement of collaborative skills. To build on the progress so far, inspectors advised teachers and subject departments in a considerable proportion of schools to make sure that the use of group work was planned and thought through carefully to ensure it aligned clearly with the objectives of lessons.

While the move towards a 'key skills' approach to teaching and learning was evident in many lessons, inspectors reported that the learning intentions of lessons often focused on the content to be delivered, rather than on the explicit teaching key skills. Furthermore, in some plans provided by subject departments, the focus was on the coverage of content, rather than on the intended learning outcomes.

Inspectors noted that teachers had made significant advances in the use of student self-assessment and peer-assessment in Junior Cycle lessons. These practices enable students to review their progress and are important in helping them in the next steps of their learning. To build on this, it is important that teachers incorporate the explicit teaching of assessment skills and the modelling of quality judgements into their classroom practice. Inspectors observed the development of very good practice in this area in some subject areas. The sharing of expertise across subject departments will, therefore, be a key factor in the further development of practice in this area.

Enabling students to learn and consolidate concepts, and to apply their learning in new contexts is an important aim of the changes in methodologies emphasised in the revised Junior Cycle curriculum. Being able to apply learning in this way is also important if students are to achieve their full potential in classroom-based assessments (CBAs). Therefore, teachers have to exercise great care in designing suitable tasks for all students to complete.

It was also noted that the process of task design could be strengthened considerably by greater collaborative practice and sharing of expertise among teachers, for example, through the subject department planning process. While it is clear that collaborative practice with regard to subject department planning has continued to develop, inspectors found that department plans often lacked full alignment between learning outcomes, pedagogy, success criteria, assessment tasks and feedback. Improving this alignment in subject department plans should further support task design for lessons by individual teachers.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, most schools moved to the use of common, single, digital platforms across classrooms, and both teachers' and students' digital skills developed significantly, often reflecting the digital key skill elements in the Junior Cycle Framework. It will be important to build upon these successes in the coming years.

While the initial roll-out of the Junior Cycle was met with some resistance from various education stakeholders, including teachers, the experience of Junior Cycle in practice has led to much more positive feedback over time. COVID-19 imposed unwelcome restrictions on teaching methodologies, for example group work. However, education partners reported a general shift in mind-set and an increasing recognition of the value of the teaching, learning and assessment approaches promoted by Junior Cycle.

Inspectors noted issues associated with over-assessment during Junior Cycle in some schools. With the addition of CBAs to the school calendar, there was an opportunity for schools to rethink their overall approach to assessment. While many availed of this opportunity, in some schools the CBA became an add-on to an already taxing assessment regime, often weighted heavily towards termly summative assessments. As we emerge from COVID-19, schools should take the opportunity to reflect on their overall approach to assessment. This reflection should take into account the need to allow space for continuous assessment without the unnecessary burden of overly-frequent summative assessments.

Transition Year remains a successful element of senior cycle provision

Transition Year has been one of the major innovations in Irish education. Though Transition Year is an optional year in most schools, more than seven in ten students opt into the programme.

Transition Year is designed to act as a bridge between Junior Cycle and Senior Cycle, and provides an opportunity for students to experience a wide range of educational inputs, including work experience, over the course of a year that is free from formal examinations. The programmes are designed at school level, within guidelines developed by the Department in 2006, and are based on a multi-layered approach. The content of each aspect of the programme varies between schools depending on location, the number of participating students, and access to co-curricular and extra-curricular activities.

The closure of schools in 2020 and the restrictions on co-curricular and extra-curricular activities resulting from COVID-19 were especially challenging in the context of Transition Year. In particular, there were significant difficulties for students in securing work experience which, for many students, is a core learning activity in Transition Year. Schools had to adapt their programmes and were provided with guidance from the Department to support them in doing so in a COVID-19 context.

In late 2016, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) commenced a review of Senior Cycle education. Part of this review process focused on exploring pathways and flexibility in Senior Cycle, and the types of learning experiences teachers, students and parents would like to see. The many strengths of Transition Year were identified during the review, including the rich opportunities for students to mature and develop personally and the wide range of subjects and learning experiences available. The programme is seen as most inclusive of a wide range of talents and abilities.

Leaving Certificate Applied uptake has levelled off; there is a need for further research into the outcomes for students studying the Leaving Certificate Applied programme

The _Leaving Certificate Applied_ (LCA) programme continues to be an option that is availed of by approximately 3,000 students annually on entry into fifth year. While the uptake of the programme has fluctuated slightly year-on-year since 2016, there is no clear trend of increase or decrease evident in the proportion of students opting for the LCA programme. However, from a peak uptake of 7.3% in 2004, uptake in 2016 and 2017 was just 5% of the Senior Cycle student cohort.[1]

LCA provides students with a more varied range of assessment modes and, hence, allows students to demonstrate their knowledge and skills in a variety of ways. Assessment in LCA is spread out over the two-year period, relieving pressure on students in the final examination. While the programme is currently taken by some students who are likely to find the established Leaving Certificate too challenging, the methodologies and assessment modes used in LCA are likely to be of value to all students.

Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) research conducted in 2019[2], showed that, while students and parents spoke favourably about the continuous assessment approach adopted in LCA, there were some concerns about the perceived stigma attached to the programme and the feeling of segregation from other students in the school. This is compounded by the restrictions in many schools that prevent LCA students taking one or more subjects from the established Leaving Certificate programme. For example, only a tiny number of LCA students take Leaving Certificate Mathematics, despite this being a requirement for entry to many third-level education programmes and jobs. The lack of a wide range of progression opportunities for LCA students into higher education is a concern. The forthcoming reform of Senior Cycle will present an important opportunity to address this inequity. At the same time, it will also be important to ensure that the broader approaches to teaching, learning and assessment that are currently used within LCA are maintained and made available to a wider range of students, while promoting the full inclusion and engagement of all students. Data from an Inspectorate survey of parents in the first half of 2020 indicates that many LCA students disengaged from their learning during the initial period of school closures, when compared with other senior cycle students.

1   National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (2017) Leaving Certificate Applied Programme Discussion Paper. Available at: https:// ncca.ie/en/resources/leaving-certificate-applied-discussion-paper/

2   Smyth, E., McCoy, S. and Banks, J. (2019) Student, Teacher and Parent Perspectives on Senior Cycle Education. Available at: https:// www.esri.ie/publications/student-teacher-and-parent-perspectives-on-senior-cycle-education

5.2.2 TEACHING AND LEARNING

The quality of teaching and learning was good or very good in most post-primary schools

Over the period September 2016 to December 2020, inspectors found the overall quality of teaching in post-primary schools to be good or very good in 92% of inspections (Table 5.1). It was found to be satisfactory in 7% of inspections and less than satisfactory in fewer than 1% of inspections. Similarly, the overall quality of learning was of a high standard; it was found to be good or very good in 90% of inspections, satisfactory in 9.3% of inspections and less than satisfactory in just over 1% of inspections.

Table 5.1: Quality of teaching and learning in post-primary schools: September 2016-December 2020

	Overall quality of teaching (%)	Overall quality of learning (%)
Very good	33.6%	31.6%
Good	58.9%	58.0%
Satisfactory	7.0%	9.3%
Fair	0.6%	1.1%
Weak	0.0%	0.0%

Source: Inspectorate, Department of Education

Teaching approaches were good or very good in a majority of lessons

Effective teachers use a broad range of methodologies that are appropriate to the learning intention and to the varying needs and abilities of students. This stimulates substantial student response, facilitates deep engagement with students and encourages productive student participation. Ultimately, teaching in this way gives a better balance between the input of the teacher and that of students.

Teaching approaches were found to be good or very good in 74% of the lessons observed during unannounced inspections and in 76% of lessons observed during announced inspections (Table 5.2). They were found to be satisfactory in 20% of lessons observed during unannounced inspections and in 19% of lessons observed during announced inspections. Teaching approaches were found to be less than satisfactory in 5.5% of lessons during announced inspections and 5.9% of lessons observed during unannounced inspections. In their responses to inspection surveys administered during whole-school evaluations - management, leadership and learning (WSE-MLLs), 83% of parents agreed that teaching was good in their child's school, while just 69% of students concurred with this. This finding highlights the importance of seeking regular feedback from students on the quality of their learning experiences. Such feedback would support schools in adapting their provision to further meet the diverse needs and learning styles of their students.

Table 5.2: Quality of teaching approaches in post-primary schools: September 2016 - December 2020

Teaching approaches	Unannounced inspections	Announced inspections
Very good	38.3%	37.9%
Good	36.0%	38.0%
Satisfactory	19.8%	18.6%
Fair	5.2%	4.8%
Weak	0.7%	0.7%

Source: Inspectorate, Department of Education

There is a need for greater emphasis on classroom discussion and on collaborative learning in post-primary schools

Inspectors found that teachers need to place a more consistent emphasis on classroom discussion and collaborative learning. While inspectors noted that teachers were using more group work at Junior Cycle, their findings showed that more progress is needed to make sure that students have good opportunities to collaborate in lessons.

During unannounced inspections, opportunities for talk and discussion were good or very good in just 71% of lessons (Table 5.3). There was scope to provide greater opportunities for students to learn through talk and discussion in over a quarter (29%) of lessons.

Table 5.3: Provision of opportunities for students to learn through talk and discussion in post-primary schools: September 2016 - December 2020

Very Good	Good	Satisfactory	Fair	Weak
37.3%	34.1%	20.4%	6.2%	2%
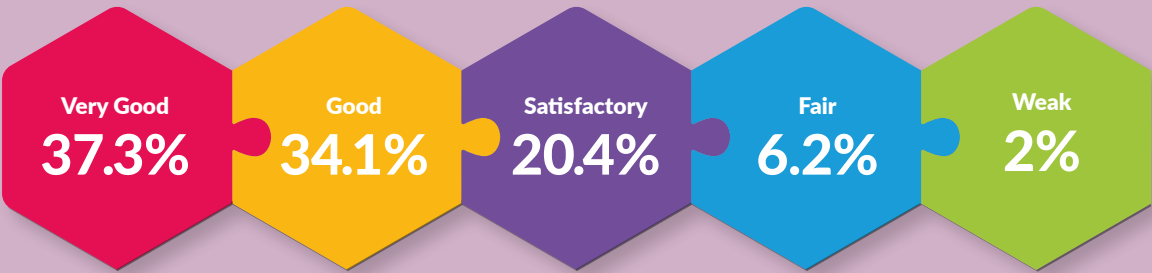
Source: Inspectorate, Department of Education

Findings from unannounced inspections indicate that in 64% of lessons, opportunities for students to learn in collaboration with their peers were good or very good. While satisfactory provision was made in 24% of lessons, in the remaining 12% of lessons, students' opportunities for collaboration with their peers in their learning were less than satisfactory. In responses to inspection surveys administered during whole-school evaluations, 81% of students agreed or strongly agreed that they got opportunities to work together with other students in their classes. However, 10% either disagreed or strongly disagreed that this was the case, and 9% reported that they did not know.

Following the re-opening of schools in September 2020, a significant minority (43%) of post-primary teachers who participated in an Inspectorate survey in November 2020, indicated that they were not able to continue to provide opportunities for their students to work collaboratively during lessons. Similarly, students who participated in focus group discussions with the Inspectorate, also in November 2020, reported that they were being provided with fewer collaborative and practical learning opportunities and that this had impacted negatively on their learning experiences.

These combined findings indicate that there is considerable scope to extend the provision for collaboration in classes with the easing of social distancing measures associated with COVID-19.

Table 5.4: Enabling students to work collaboratively in post-primary schools: September 2016 - December 2020

Very Good **34.5%**	Good **29.9%**	Satisfactory **23.7%**
	Fair **8.4%**	Weak **3.5%**
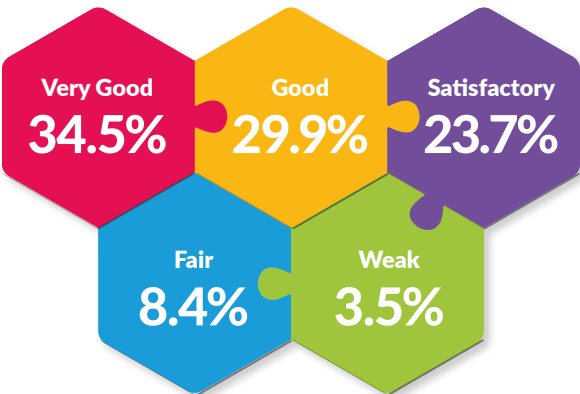
Table 5.5: Opportunities for students in post-primary schools to work together with other students in their classes: September 2016 - December 2020

Strongly agree **25.2%**	Agree **55.5%**	Don't know **8.9%**
	Disagree **8.5%**	Strongly disagree **1.9%**
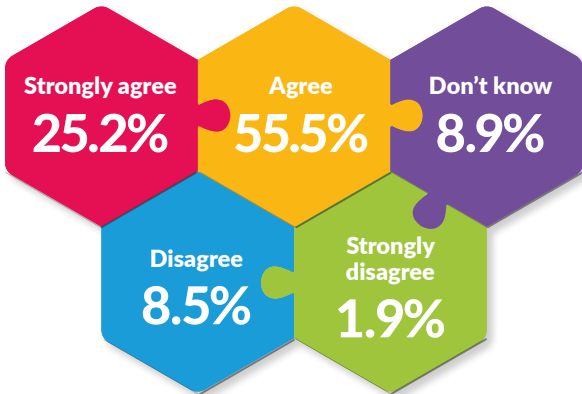
Source: Inspectorate, Department of Education

Catering for the varying abilities of students continues to require attention and improvement

One of the key skills of teaching is to recognise the different learning needs and the learning styles of students and then to respond to those needs and styles in the most appropriate way. Effective teachers take a differentiated approach in their teaching by adjusting their teaching approaches, or the pace or content of the lesson, to suit the differing needs of students.

During the period September 2016 to December 2020, inspectors found that improvements were needed in the extent to which teachers catered effectively for the needs of different students. Differentiation was good or very good in 64% of the lessons observed across post-primary unannounced inspections (Table 5.6). Opportunities for the further development of differentiated approaches existed in the remaining 36% of lessons, with practice judged by inspectors as being satisfactory in 27% of lessons and less than satisfactory in 9.7% of lessons. In announced inspections, in-class support for learning needs, where the subject teacher with the support of the special education teacher provides for the needs of students with special educational needs in the mainstream class setting, was found to be good or very good in 73% of cases. Inspectors found practice to be satisfactory in 20% of lessons and less than satisfactory in 6.5% of lessons. In addition to catering for the needs of students who experience challenges in aspects of their learning, inspection findings indicate that teachers also need to be mindful that students who are more able in aspects of the curriculum should be suitably challenged. These findings are reflected in those of the international assessment, _Programme for International Student assessment_ (PISA) 2018, which found that there was just an average proportion of high-achievers in Science and a significantly lower proportion of high-performing students in Mathematics in Ireland, compared to the average across Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries. Teachers also need to make provision for exceptionally able students, some of whom may require different approaches to their learning on a daily basis in the mainstream classroom. Schools and teachers should use the continuum of support, _a graduated solution-orientated framework of assessment and intervention in schools_[3], to identify the needs of these students, and to plan for short and long term interventions where appropriate.

Table 5.6: Quality of differentiation and in-class support for learning needs in post-primary schools: September 2016 - December 2020

	Differentiation is evident (unannounced inspections)	In-class support for learning needs (announced inspections)
Very good	27.8%	37.3%
Good	35.8%	36.0%
Satisfactory	26.7%	20.2%
Fair	7.6%	5.5%
Weak	2.1%	1.0%

Source: Inspectorate, Department of Education

---

3   Department of Education (2007) Special Educational Needs a Continuum of Support.
    Available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/dca316-special-education-needs-a-continuum-of-support/

High levels of enjoyment and motivation were evident in lessons

Good or very good levels of student enjoyment and motivation were evident to inspectors in 80% of the lessons observed during announced inspections in post-primary schools. However, in their responses to inspection surveys administered during WSE-MLLs, students, themselves were somewhat less positive; just 64% of students agreed or strongly agreed that they enjoyed attending classes and just 63% concurred that their classes were interesting (Table 5.7). As noted earlier, this finding underlines the need to seek regular feedback from students in relation to their learning experiences.

Table 5.7: Perspectives of post-primary students on their classes: September 2016 - December 2020

	I enjoy going to my classes	My classes are interesting
	Student surveys: WSE- MLL inspections	
Strongly Agree	9.9%	10.8%
Agree	54.5%	51.7%
Don't Know	17.2%	17.5%
Disagree	14.9%	15.8%
Strongly Disagree	3.5%	4.2%

Source: Inspectorate, Department of Education

In most instances, the quality of the learning environment in post-primary classrooms was good or very good

The quality of the learning environment was found to be good or very good in 85% of lessons observed in post-primary schools during announced inspections (Table 5.8). Inspectors found that it was just satisfactory in 12% of lessons and less than satisfactory in 2.8% of lessons. Inspection reports frequently referenced the important role of the learning environment in strengthening students' oral communication skills. Advice given to teachers in this regard highlighted the need to develop the learning environment further to encourage small group and whole class discussions and collaborative conversations ('a talking classroom') in which there was a balance between teacher input and student participation.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the learning environment changed dramatically for students as learning moved online for an extended period of time. The findings from parent and student surveys conducted during this time are dealt with in Chapter 10. They point to considerable successes for many students in cases where teachers and schools were able to adapt their practices rapidly. However, the surveys also pointed to considerable issues with regard to equity of access to online learning due to socio-economic and other factors.

Table 5.8: Quality of the learning environment in post-primary schools: September 2016 - December 2020

Very Good	Good	Satisfactory	Fair	Weak
47.0%	38.3%	11.9%	2.4%	0.4%

Source: Inspectorate, Department of Education

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, evidence from international surveys and from inspection showed that Irish post-primary students were less likely than those in other countries to use digital technology in the classroom

Findings from *PISA* 2018[4] show that post-primary students in Ireland were less likely than students in other OECD countries to use digital devices in the classroom. Furthermore, Irish students who participated in the PISA study reported that, when digital devices featured in lessons, they were used primarily by the teacher. PISA reported that principals attributed this to the lack of sufficient access to technical support or assistance, devices and broadband as well as deficits in the skill level of teachers.

The pattern emerging from inspection findings prior to the COVID-19 pandemic reflected the PISA outcomes. Inspection findings also indicated that the use of digital technology was not a regular feature of lessons. In unannounced inspections, inspectors reported that the use of information and communications technology (ICT) was good or very good in 72% of lessons where the use of ICT was observed (Table 5.9). Just over half of the students (54%) who responded to inspection surveys indicated that they had opportunities to use ICT regularly in their lessons (Table 5.10). A significant minority (34%) disagreed that they used ICT regularly in their lessons.

Table 5.9: Effectiveness of ICT-use in lessons in post-primary schools: September 2016 - December 2020

Very Good	Good	Satisfactory	Fair	Weak
36.6%	35.3%	20.3%	4.6%	3.2%
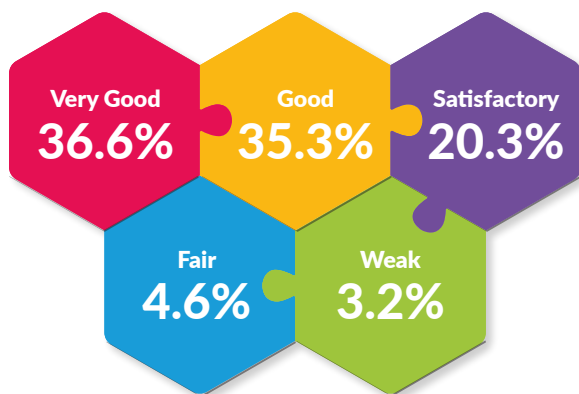
Source: Inspectorate, Department of Education

Table 5.10: Frequency of use of ICT by students during classes in post-primary schools: September 2016 - December 2020

Very Good	Good	Satisfactory	Fair	Weak
21.9%	32.0%	11.7%	21.7%	12.7%
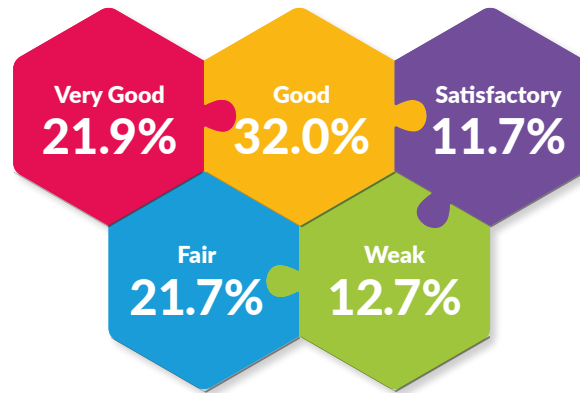
Source: Inspectorate, Department of Education

---

4   *Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) is an OECD project. PISA, which takes place every three years, measures 15-year-olds' ability to use their reading, mathematics and science knowledge and skills to meet real-life challenges.*

During the COVID-19 pandemic, schools became more adept in their use of information and communications technology to facilitate teaching and learning

The need to move to online learning rapidly when schools were forced to close due to the pandemic in the first half of 2020, led to a significant change in schools' use of information and communications technology (ICT) in teaching and learning. In general, post-primary schools made considerable efforts to make online learning available to students in the March to June 2020 period. Teachers were supported in many cases by online resources and continuing professional development (CPD) provided by the Professional Development Support Service for Teachers (PDST). As detailed elsewhere in this report, efforts were made to make ICT devices available to students and teachers provided a range of lessons online.

The success of these efforts varied considerably across schools and among students: as was the case in many countries, some students in Ireland struggled in their learning in the online environment. However, Irish schools and teachers learned from the experience. It was noticeable that the findings of Inspectorate research with principals during October-November 2020 indicated that, during the COVID-19 pandemic, post-primary schools became much more adept in relation to the use of digital technologies in teaching and learning, with many principals reporting that digital technologies had become embedded in curriculum and assessment practices. Almost all post-primary teachers who participated in an Inspectorate survey in October 2020 agreed that at that time, they used digital technologies, either in every lesson or every day. Students who engaged in focus group discussions with inspectors in November 2020 were very positive about the increased use of digital technologies by their teachers to support their learning. They welcomed and praised their schools for the flexibility and pace with which their schools and teachers had adopted digital learning approaches. Nonetheless, some students stated that they would like increased use and further development of digital learning opportunities in their classes.

5.2.4 ASSESSMENT

There is scope to enhance the quality of feedback provided to students on their work

The overall quality of assessment was good or very good in 71% of inspections (Table 5.11). However, it was just satisfactory in 26% of schools and was less than satisfactory in 2.7% of them.

Table 5.11: Overall quality of assessment in post-primary schools: September 2016 - December 2020

Very Good	Good	Satisfactory	Fair	Weak
18.8%	52.6%	25.9%	2.6%	0.1%
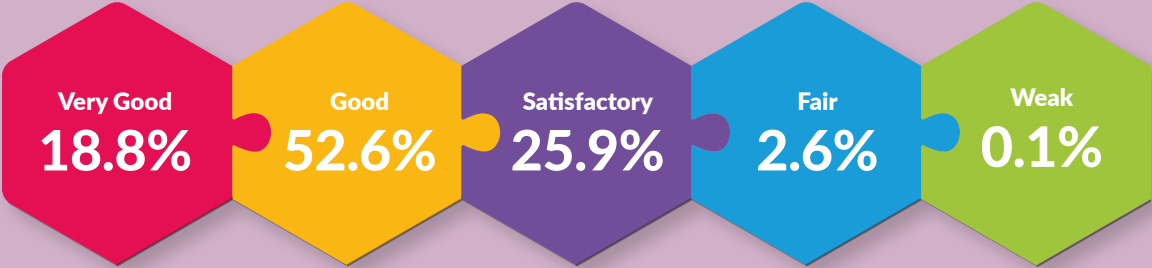
Source: Inspectorate, Department of Education

Where assessment was found to be less than good, the quality of feedback provided to students on their work tended to be a core issue. There was also scope to make greater use of open-ended questioning and higher-order questioning in lessons. In some schools, there was a need to embed formative assessment practices across the school, and to actively share best practice among teachers in this regard. These findings were reflected in student responses to inspection surveys administered during WSE-MLL inspections in which 63% of students concurred with the statement that their teachers talk to them about how to improve their learning, while over 20% of students disagreed that this was the case (Table 5.12).

Table 5.12: Student responses to the statement: Teachers talk to me about how to improve my learning (Student surveys: WSE-MLL inspections)
September 2016-December 2020

Strongly Agree	Agree	Don't Know	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
19.4%	**43.3%**	**16.6%**	**17.3%**	**3.4%**
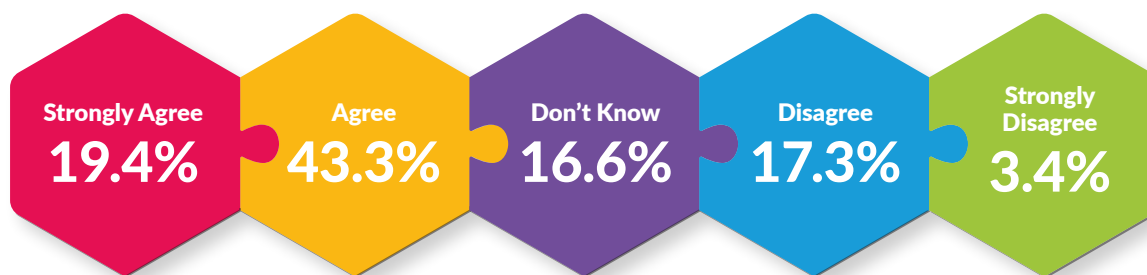
Source: Inspectorate, Department of Education

In most subjects, an increasing proportion of students are taking state examinations at higher level

A notable development across most subjects has been an increase in the proportion of students taking state examinations at higher level in both Junior Cycle and Senior Cycle. While the proportion of students opting for higher level during the Calculated Grades and Accredited Grades processes in 2020 and 2021 was considerably higher than in previous years, higher level uptake had been increasing year-on-year. Various Department-led strategies, including the Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) and Digital strategies, have contributed to progress in this regard through the establishment of standards against which schools can measure their progress across multiple areas of practice.

While the upward trend in the proportion of students opting for higher level should be celebrated, it should be noted that such a trend cannot continue indefinitely. There are many students for whom ordinary level remains the most appropriate option. While it remains the role of the school and of parents to inform students and to encourage high achievement, it should be the needs of the student that ultimately inform the final decision around level of study.

5.3 SUBJECT PROVISION IN POST-PRIMARY SCHOOLS

The curriculum in post-primary schools comprises a range of subjects and short courses, as well as other learning experiences. In the remainder of this chapter, general trends are identified, and specific inspection and assessment findings in respect of some subjects are explored in more detail.

5.3.1 ENGLISH

Inspectors report high standards in the teaching and learning of English

During the period September 2016 to December 2020, inspectors reported many strengths in the teaching of English and there is good evidence to suggest that students achieve very good standards in the subject. In line with general trends, data from state examinations in the period 2016 to 2020 shows a steady increase in the uptake of higher level English in both Junior Cycle and Senior Cycle (Table 5.13). The first State Examinations Commission (SEC) examination of the new Junior Cycle specification was held in 2017 and saw the removal of foundation level as an option.

Table 5.13: Numbers of students taking English examination in Leaving Certificate and Junior Cycle: 2016-2020

Year	Leaving Certificate			Junior Cycle			
	Higher level	Ordinary level	Total candidates	Higher level	Ordinary level	Foundation level	Total candidates
2020	74.1%	74.1%	56,588	N/A*	N/A	N/A	N/A
2019	73.5%	73.5%	54,694	80.6%	19.4%	N/A	63,619
2018	72.2%	72.2%	53,036	79.0%	21.0%	N/A	61,898
2017	71.6%	71.6%	54,138	79.1%	20.9%	N/A	60,991
2016	68.1%	68.1%	53,708	75.4%	22.7%	1.9%	59,716

Source: State Examinations Commission
* As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Junior Cycle 2020 examinations were cancelled.

There were positive findings in relation to whole-school literacy

Inspectors found the overall quality of teaching to be good or very good in 94% of subject inspections of English. The quality of students' learning in English was good or very good in 87% of subject inspections. There were positive findings with regard to whole-school improvement plans for literacy in post-primary schools. Inspectors commended subject departments for collaborating on identified whole-school literacy strategies and incorporating actions into their department plans. Positive commentary in English subject inspection reports on co-curricular and cross-curricular activities that support literacy included reference to teachers' commitment to expanding students' experience of literacy skills outside the classroom through activities such as national competitions, creative writing workshops, and visits to theatres and cinemas. Particular praise was given to the development and maintenance of school libraries that contributed to the positive uptake of reading for pleasure.

A number of reports affirmed the explicit teaching of vocabulary development, often through the identification of key terminology. Opportunities for students to engage in extended writing tasks were also praised. Overall, there was evidence of regular and developmental feedback by teachers on students' written assignments as a means of supporting students' improvement.

Vocabulary development and oral literacy should be given higher priority

One of the regular recommendations in English reports was that more frequent opportunities be provided to expand students' vocabulary. Some reports made specific reference to vocabulary development in the case of students whose first language was not English. Common themes in reports highlighted the need for further development of students' oral literacy. Particular attention was given to the importance of encouraging discussion and exploratory talk among students, and sharing of views between students, as a means of supporting deeper engagement with texts.

Teachers' modelling of the writing process would support further improvements in students' written work

The need for teachers to model the writing process was identified repeatedly. The value of exemplars of teachers' and students' work as a means of supporting improvements in students' written work was noted, and explicit links were made with the Junior Cycle Collection of Texts[5] in this regard.

Irish students performed very well in the Programme for International Student Assessment

The outcomes for Irish students in the _PISA[6] 2018_ corroborated the positive findings in English subject inspection reports. Students in Ireland performed above average in reading literacy, and Irish student performance in reading literacy continues to be amongst the highest across Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and European Union (EU) countries, ranking 4th out of 36 OECD countries. It is worth noting that females in Ireland significantly outperformed their male counterparts in reading literacy again in this PISA cycle.

5.3.2 IRISH

Inspections of Irish indicated that the quality of teaching and learning in Irish was good or very good in a majority of schools. However, this was considerably below the standards achieved in the other core subjects

In subject inspections of Irish over the period covered by this report, the overall quality of teaching was found to be good in 71% of schools inspected and very good in 7.9% of schools. The corresponding figures for learning were 68% and 7.9%. These numbers are in sharp contrast, however, to the corresponding numbers for English and Mathematics where the overall quality of teaching was good or very good in excess of 90% of schools in both subjects; the overall quality of learning was good or very good in excess of 86% of schools in both subjects.

The steady rise in the proportion of students taking higher level Irish at Leaving Certificate is encouraging

The uptake of higher level Irish in state examinations has shown a slow but steady increase in recent years, with currently just under 50% of students taking higher level Irish at Senior Cycle (Table 5.14). The proportion of students taking foundation level Irish in Senior Cycle is also decreasing steadily. These trends are encouraging.

---

5   _Students compile a collection of their texts in a variety of genres over time and choose two pieces to present for summative assessment_

6   _Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) is an OECD project. PISA, which takes place every three years, measures 15-year-olds' ability to use their reading, mathematics and science knowledge and skills to meet real-life challenges._

Table 5.14: Numbers of students taking Irish examination in Leaving Certificate and Junior Certificate 2016-2020

Year	Leaving Certificate				Junior Cycle			
	Higher level	Ordinary level	Foundation level	Total candidates	Higher level	Ordinary level	Foundation level	Total candidates
2020	49.7%	47.4%	2.9%	49,733	N/A*	N/A	N/A	N/A
2019	47.9%	46.2%	5.9%	48,334	58.8%	39.2%	2.0%	55,859
2018	47.9%	45.9%	6.2%	46,750	57.9%	40.1%	2.0%	54,382
2017	46.2%	47.1%	6.7%	47,833	57.7%	40.4%	1.9%	53,838
2016	42.6%	50.0%	7.4%	47,211	56.7%	41.0%	2.3%	52,560

Source: State Examinations Commission
* As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Junior Cycle 2020 examinations were cancelled.

While inspectors noted that teachers generally used Irish during lessons, practice varied considerably in relation to opportunities for use of Irish by students

In general, inspectors commended teachers' use of Irish with some subject inspection reports referring to teachers' commitment to the use of Irish as the target language in all interactions with students during Irish lessons. However, the need to significantly increase and develop student opportunities to speak, work and to interact and express their learning through Irish was a frequent recommendation in subject inspection reports. In some instances, inspectors noted that translation to English was overused as an instructional tool. While the use of active learning methodologies was frequently acknowledged in reports where students were given opportunities to engage with each other through pair work, group work and other whole class activities, inspectors stated that some of those opportunities did not always afford students with authentic opportunities to use Irish. Inspectors highlighted the need to provide stimulating lesson tasks and activities, for example open discussion and debate on current affairs and other areas of interest to them, which necessitate communication between students through Irish.

There is a need for more effective differentiation in the teaching of Irish to meet the needs and abilities of individual students

In subject inspection reports, inspectors highlighted the need for effective differentiation in the teaching of Irish to meet the needs and abilities of individual students. In particular, inspectors emphasised that adequate support and scaffolding should be provided for all students as they acquire the language at various stages in their learning. Inspectors also highlighted the need to differentiate tasks for the more proficient learners of Irish in order to challenge them appropriately and support them in more advanced learning. The sharing of learning intentions, success criteria for lessons and homework tasks, and the provision of language exemplars were also reported as areas for improvement.

Support for Irish as a living language at whole school level was good or very good in the majority of schools; there was scope for optimising the opportunities for such use of Irish in Transition Year

Commendably, there was good or very good support for Irish at whole school level according to many inspection reports. Inspectors noted that many schools supported the promotion of Irish as a living language through a series of school based or external Irish language events, as well as student participation in a range of Irish language competitions including _Seachtain na Gaeilge_, _Scléip_, _Gaeilge 24_, _Gaelbhratach_, _Díospóireachtaí Ghael Linn_, and _Oireachtas na Gaeilge_. Some reports described the Irish language as having a high profile in the school and referred to initiatives such as the establishment of school-based Irish speaking groups where students meet to speak Irish informally. The need for students to experience Irish as a living language, whether in school or in the community, cannot be underestimated and the work of schools in promoting the language outside of the classroom is acknowledged and commended.

Transition Year provides schools with the opportunity to engage students in their learning in different ways and affords them a range of diverse and motivating learning opportunities both in school and further afield. However, it was evident from subject inspections of Irish that some schools are not optimising the opportunity to explore ways of presenting Irish as a living language to students during a year that is ideally suited to such an approach. In these instances, inspectors highlighted the need for the Transition Year programme for Irish to be reviewed and updated to provide a stimulating, enjoyable and inspiring curriculum for language learning during that year.

The effective use of digital technologies to promote and support Irish language learning needs to be extended

There has been considerable investment in digital technology in recent years. The potential of digital technology in supporting effective language learning, including the learning of Irish, should not be underestimated. In some reports on subject inspections of Irish, inspectors commented favourably on the effective use of digital technology and other innovative and interesting resources to support Irish language acquisition and student participation and engagement. However, inspectors also highlighted the need to increase the use and range of appropriate digital resources considerably, particularly as a means of situating students' learning in a contemporary context, in order to engage their interest.

Assessment strategies and effective planning to support the teaching and learning of Irish are areas that require significant improvement

During the period to which this report refers, inspection findings indicated that assessment was a key area for development in provision for Irish. The need for more effective monitoring of student progress and homework in Irish, particularly in relation to students' oral skills was noted. Reports also emphasised the need for effective formative feedback for students that outlines their progress in Irish language learning and gives clear instruction as to how they can improve. The need for a whole-school policy and approach to effective assessment practices was also identified in reports, as was the value of reporting to parents on students' oral language acquisition and progress.
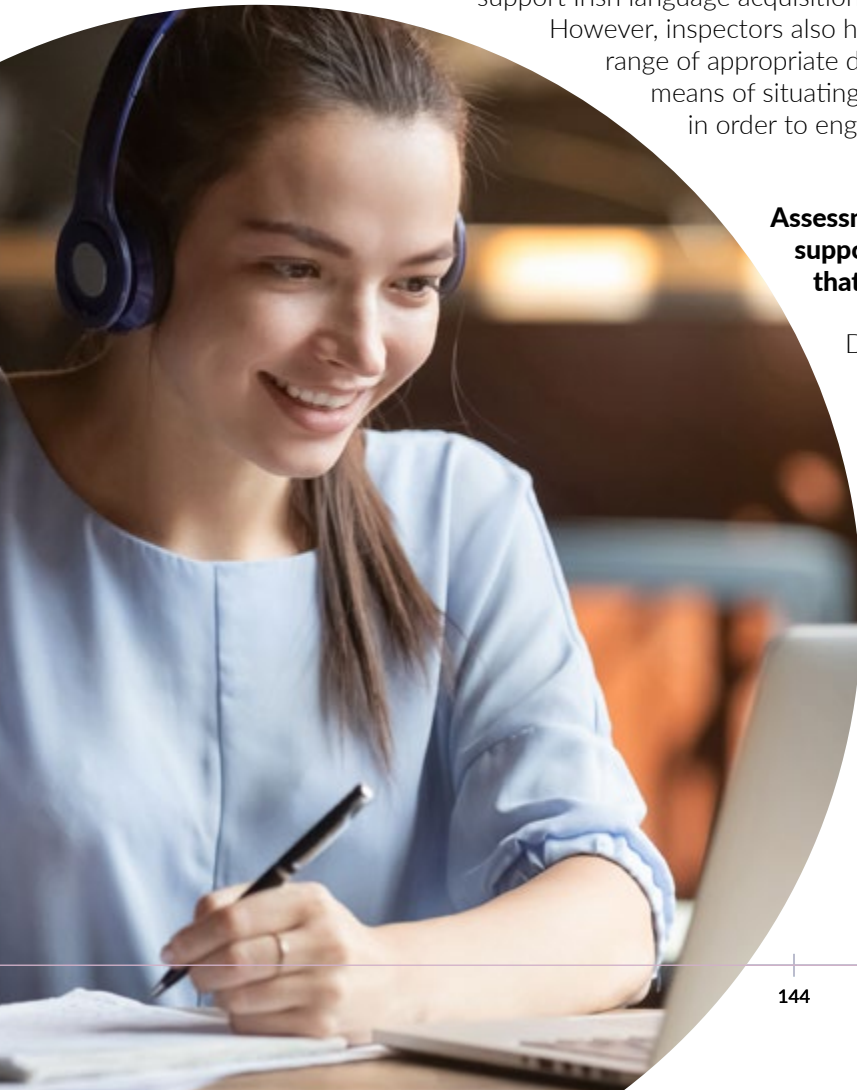
Effective planning noted by inspectors included practices related to the implementation of the new Junior Cycle specifications for Irish. In particular, inspectors praised the collaborative practices and approaches adopted by teachers to engage with the implementation process. However, inspectors recommended improvements in relation to more effective planning for Irish generally, which included the use of common templates, the setting of clear targets and learning intentions, and the integration of effective methodologies, assessment practices and relevant resources into the curricular plans. Inspectors also recommended the inclusion of strategies to develop students' understanding of themselves as language learners and highlighted the importance of collaboration among teachers on the implementation of the new Junior Cycle specifications. In some instances, inspectors recommended that the analysis of examination results be used in conjunction with the schools' self-evaluation process to adopt an action-planning approach to improvement. In other instances, inspectors recommended that schools promote opportunities for peer review by teachers and team-teaching as ways to share and promote best practice.

The year 2019 saw the introduction of revised circulars related to exemptions from the study of Irish

Revised circulars on exemptions from the study of Irish were introduced for implementation in English-medium primary and post-primary schools in 2019. These circulars were informed by extensive stakeholder feedback and by Department policy in the areas of language, special educational needs and inclusion. Key changes introduced in _Circular 0053/2019_ included:

- an increase to 12 years of age or the final year in primary school as the most appropriate time to consider an application for an exemption from the study of Irish, in the case of students enrolling from abroad or re-enrolling following a period of three consecutive years abroad

- a move away from a diagnostic categorical model to a needs-based model, making psychological assessments and cognitive ability scores no longer necessary to process applications

- the broadening of the literacy-based criteria to a score in either word reading or reading comprehension, or spelling at or/below the 10th percentile

- the facility for students who had reached 18 years of age to make their own application

- a formal appeals mechanism.

As set out in the circular, the Department was engaged at the time of publication of this report in planning to conduct an initial review of its implementation. While an initial review of available data suggests an increase in the number of exemptions granted at post-primary level in circumstances where students present with significant learning difficulties that are persistent, it is too early to identify any particular trend at this stage.

Data and trends concerning exemptions from the study of Irish at post-primary level need to be considered in the broader educational context, including third-level. As evidenced in the Inspectorate's _Research Report: Review of Policy and Practice in Relation to Exemptions from the Study of Irish (2018)_, a key driver of applications for exemptions at post-primary level is the facility for an exemption from Irish provided by National University of Ireland (NUI) constituent universities and recognised colleges. Inconsistencies between the circumstances and criteria for exemption from Irish identified in Department circulars and the NUI guide for applicants[7] will require consideration in any upcoming review.

---

7   _Guide for applying to NUI for an exemption from Irish and/or a Third Language is available at:_
    http://www.nui.ie/college/docs/exemption.pdf

5.3.3 MATHEMATICS

Inspectors have identified positive trends in classroom practices in Mathematics

During the period 2016 to 2020, inspectors' overall findings with regard to the quality of teaching and learning in Mathematics have been very positive. It is evident that the more student-centred approaches promoted by revisions to the mathematics syllabus over the last decade are now resulting in more engaging teaching practices in most classrooms. Uptake of higher level Mathematics has continued to increase in both Junior Cycle and Senior Cycle (Table 5.15). This trend has continued to be supported by the bonus points available to students who take the higher level Mathematics examination in their Leaving Certificate.

Table 5.15: Numbers of students taking Mathematics examination in Leaving Certificate and Junior Cycle / Junior Certificate: 2016-2020

Year	Leaving Certificate				Junior Cycle			
	Higher level	Ordinary level	Foundation level	Total candidates	Higher level	Ordinary level	Foundation level	Total candidates
2020	36.0%	59.4%	4.6%	56,984	N/A*	N/A	N/A	N/A
2019	33.0%	57.1%	9.9%	55,094	58.8%	36.8%	4.4%	63,669
2018	31.5%	58.7%	9.8%	53,391	57.2%	38.5%	4.3%	61,941
2017	30.0%	59.2%	10.8%	54,665	57.1%	38.6%	4.3%	61,032
2016	28.0%	60.0%	12.0%	54,225	55.1%	39.9%	5.0%	59,589

Source: State Examinations Commission
* As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Junior Cycle 2020 examinations were cancelled.

There have been significant curricular changes in both Junior Cycle and Senior Cycle Mathematics

The _Junior Cycle Mathematics_ specification was introduced for first year students in September 2018. There are two classroom-based assessments (CBAs) and an Assessment Task as part of the specification as well as a written examination. There has been significant investment in continuing professional development (CPD) for teachers in both Junior and Senior Cycle, but more specifically for Junior Cycle through the Junior Cycle for Teachers (JCT). The new _Mathematical Applications_ specification for the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) was introduced in September 2021 and will be examined for the first time in 2023, with CPD currently being provided by the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST).

Levels of experiential and constructivist learning in Mathematics have increased

Inspection findings on the quality of teaching and learning in Mathematics were encouraging; inspectors found the overall quality of students' learning in Mathematics to be good or very good in 91% of subject inspections. The overall quality of teaching was found to be good or very good in 92% of these inspections. Inspection reports point to improving levels of experiential learning in lessons and an increasing emphasis on constructivist approaches to the introduction of mathematical concepts which allow students to become

active participants in their learning and to construct learning based on their experiences. During announced inspections, high levels of student engagement were reported in 83% of the mathematics lessons observed. Where there was less student engagement, this was often due to an imbalance between the level of teacher input and students' active engagement with the lesson content. In such cases, inspectors advised that teachers dedicate a higher proportion of lesson time to active learning, where students are provided with opportunities to collaborate, hypothesise and engage in and persevere with increasingly difficult tasks.

The use of assessment to support learning in Mathematics is an area for development

The use of assessment to support learning was found to be just satisfactory or less than satisfactory in a quarter (25%) of lessons observed in mathematics inspections. In such lessons, inspectors pointed to a need for enhanced formative feedback on students' work, the further development of questioning strategies that require students to explain their thinking, and greater use of peer and self-assessment. The need for enhanced formative feedback was highlighted further in survey findings during the COVID-19 pandemic. A number of inspection reports also referenced the need for greater cross-curricular planning so that links between Mathematics and other subjects were identified and used to create integrated learning opportunities.

Overall, Irish students performed very well in Mathematics in international assessments

Results from _Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study_ (TIMSS) 2019 indicated that Ireland was the top performing EU country in Mathematics among second year students. The findings from _PISA 2018_ were also positive and indicated that students in Ireland were significantly above the OECD average in Mathematics. There were fewer low-performing students in Ireland in Mathematics compared with the average across OECD countries. However, it is worth noting that student performance on _PISA 2018_ Mathematics was characterised by a significantly lower percentage of high achievers (8.2%) compared with the average across OECD countries (10.9%). The relative underperformance of higher-achieving students in Ireland in Mathematics was also highlighted in the last _Chief Inspector's Report_ which was published in 2016.

While the relative stability of Irish students' scores in the Programme for International Student Assessment 2018 was welcome, some of the findings point to significant challenges for the teaching of Mathematics in Irish post-primary schools

The _PISA_ assessments in 2018 were administered entirely online. Some of the items were traditional-style PISA test items re-presented in digital format and, on these questions, Irish students performed relatively well. However, the PISA test included new test items that exploited the capacity of the online methodology to test students' ability to apply mathematical skills in dynamic, problem-solving environments. It was notable that Irish students performed less well on these newer types of items, indicating that they found it challenging to apply their mathematical learning. Given the importance of mathematical skills in areas that are likely to be increasingly economically significant, as well as the importance of Mathematics as a tool in everyday life, the relative weakness of Irish students in applying mathematical concepts and skills should be addressed in curriculum design, teacher education and practice, Inspectorate evaluations and within state examinations.

5.3.4 HISTORY

Inspectors observed high levels of student engagement in most history lessons

The _Junior Cycle History_ specification was introduced for first year students in 2018 and History became a core subject at Junior Cycle for all first year students commencing Junior Cycle in September 2020. The new subject specification aims to enable students to develop the necessary conceptual understanding, disciplinary skills and subject knowledge to investigate the actions of people in the past, and to come to a deeper understanding of the human condition. As such, there is an increased onus on history teachers to mediate an engaging and thought-provoking learning journey for students that instils a clear sense of where we have come from and how we can learn from the lessons of the past. Inspectors' findings in history lessons show that such teaching approaches were evident in a high proportion of lessons. Data from state examinations in the period 2016 to 2020 shows higher level uptake in Junior Certificate History fluctuated to a minor extent (Table 5.16). In Leaving Certificate, data shows a significant increase in higher level uptake.

Table 5.16: Numbers of students taking History examination in Leaving Certificate and Junior Certificate: 2016-2020

Year	Leaving Certificate			Junior Cycle		
	Higher level	**Ordinary level**	**Total candidates**	**Higher level**	**Ordinary level**	**Total candidates**
2020	77.0%	23.0%	12,295	N/A*	N/A	N/A
2019	75.1%	24.9%	11,743	72.4%	27.6%	56,924
2018	74.1%	25.9%	11,476	73.2%	26.8%	55,860
2017	73.8%	26.2%	12,194	74.8%	25.2%	55,633
2016	70.7%	29.3%	12,381	73.7%	26.3%	54,247

Source: State Examinations Commission
* As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Junior Cycle 2020 examinations were cancelled.

The development of differentiated teaching practices and greater emphasis on Transition Year are areas for development in History

Inspectors found the overall quality of teaching to be good or very good in 96% of history subject inspections. The corresponding figure for learning was 85%. In most inspections, inspectors observed affirmative and constructive interactions in lessons. High levels of student engagement were reported in 87% of the history lessons evaluated. Inspectors also noted very good assessment techniques that helped students to develop a greater historical consciousness. While inspectors commended the promotion of historical literacy among students, there was particular emphasis in reports on the importance of developing students' historical empathy so that they gain an understanding of the experiences, decisions, and actions of people in the past.

The development of teaching practices that enable teachers to give students of all capabilities the best chance of learning was found to be less than good in 35% of history lessons observed. This is a matter of concern. In such lessons, inspection reports advised wider use of differentiated teaching strategies, including co-operative learning strategies, to cater for the wide range of abilities in the classroom. The need to further develop History in Transition Year was recommended in a significant minority of history inspections, and specific emphasis was given to the importance of developing interdisciplinary, cross-curricular approaches. Such an approach promotes more activity-based learning which, in turn, advances students' research skills and can further increase their levels of engagement.

5.3.5 GEOGRAPHY

Geography remains a popular subject in post-primary schools

Geography is the study of the Earth's landscapes, peoples, places and environments, and was previously taught as a core subject at higher and ordinary level for Junior Certificate. Geography provides a platform to analyse world events, empowering young people as informed, active citizens. Studying the subject enhances students' ability to engage with issues such as sustainable development, economic systems, hazard management and climate change, which are topics of increasing relevance in our modern world. Since September 2018, Geography has been offered at common level in the new Junior Cycle curriculum. It was due to be examined for the first time in 2021. However, the COVID-19 pandemic made it impossible to hold these examinations so the new specification will be examined for the first time in June 2022. As a core subject Geography was popular, with 58,310 candidates sitting the paper at higher or ordinary level when the Junior Cycle was last examined in 2019 (Table 5.17). The strong position of the subject is also reflected in the high number of candidates who continue to study the subject at Leaving Certificate. In each of the years 2016 to 2020, in excess of 23,000 students took the Leaving Certificate examination paper at either higher or ordinary level.

Inspectors reported evidence of highly effective planning for Geography to support students of all abilities

The Senior Cycle *Geography Syllabus* builds on the key skills and knowledge gained from studying *Geography* at Junior Cycle, and is presented in the form of core, elective, and optional areas of study, with a mandatory geographical investigation component. Where good planning was evident, teachers used a skills-based approach to teaching and learning in lessons. This planning included good examples of differentiation in mixed ability groups that ensured that sufficient challenge was provided for students of all abilities. Inspection reports also noted teachers' use of effective questioning strategies to support assessment of student learning.

Table 5.17: Numbers of students taking Geography examination in Leaving Certificate and Junior Certificate: 2016-2020

Year	Leaving Certificate			Junior Cycle		
	Higher level	Ordinary level	Total candidates	Higher level	Ordinary level	Total candidates
2020	84.9%	15.1%	24,150	N/A*	N/A	N/A
2019	82.8%	17.2%	24,121	85.8%	14.2%	58,310
2018	81.9%	18.1%	23,326	86.3%	13.7%	57,250
2017	80.6%	19.4%	23,951	85.8%	14.2%	56,513
2016	77.4%	22.6%	24,116	85.4%	14.6%	55,755

Source: State Examinations Commission
* As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Junior Cycle 2020 examinations were cancelled.

The overall quality of teaching and learning was good or very good in almost all geography subject inspections. Inspectors reported high levels of engagement by students and the use of active teaching methodologies to support students in their learning. A positive feature of many lessons was the use of ICT to support positive learning experiences and outcomes for students. Good use was made of _Scoilnet_ maps and other digital tools.

An engaging transition year programme offers students an opportunity to develop their investigative skills in their local area

A small number of reports recommended that the provision for Geography in Transition Year should be reviewed as the subject was either not being offered, or the subject plan was not being implemented fully. In a very small number of reports, inspectors were concerned about a focus on Leaving Certificate material in transition year lessons. A significant number of schools had a well-structured, engaging plan in place, with careful consideration of geographic skills development. In this context a common recommendation was to develop local fieldwork opportunities to allow students to practise the skills taught in class.

5.3.6 SCIENCE

Inspectors noted increasing levels of experiential learning in Science

Junior Cycle Science remains a popular option for students and is mandatory in many schools. The skills of critical thinking and investigation that are promoted in the science subjects are vital skills for all students to have as they navigate multiple, and often conflicting, sources of information. Such skills are also highly valued by employers. This section looks primarily at Junior Cycle Science where the trend towards increasing levels of experiential learning, noted in many mathematics lessons, was also evident. The Junior Cycle Science specification was examined for the first time in 2019. Up to that point, the uptake of Junior Certificate higher-level Science had remained steady (Table 5.18). Data from state examinations in the period 2016 to 2020 shows a significant increase in the uptake of higher level Biology (Table 5.18), Chemistry and Physics in Senior Cycle (Table 5.19).

Table 5.18: Numbers of students taking Biology examination in Leaving Certificate and Science examination in Junior Cycle / Junior Certificate: 2016-2020

	Leaving Certificate Biology			Junior Cycle / Junior Certificate Science		
Year	Higher level	Ordinary level	Total candidates	Higher level	Ordinary level	Total candidates
2020	84.9%	15.1%	34,852	N/A*	N/A	N/A
2019	79.3%	20.7%	34,109	Common level		59,543
2018	79.1%	20.9%	33,549	79.8%	20.2%	58,208
2017	77.8%	22.2%	34,292	79.9%	20.1%	57,208
2016	73.9%	26.1%	34,101	79.1%	20.9%	55,471

Source: State Examinations Commission
* As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Junior Cycle 2020 examinations were cancelled.

Table 5.19: Numbers of students taking Chemistry and Physics examinations in Leaving Certificate: 2016 - 2020

Year	Leaving Certificate Chemistry			Leaving Certificate Physics		
	Higher level	Ordinary level	Total candidates	Higher level	Ordinary level	Total candidates
2020	90.0	10.0	9,662	86.9	13.1	8,097
2019	86.7	13.3	9,506	82.9	17.1	7,942
2018	86.6	13.4	9,167	83.1	16.9	7,535
2017	86.2	13.8	9,468	82.7	17.3	7,585
2016	84.3	15.7	9,089	77.4	22.6	7,753

Source: State Examinations Commission

Good levels of student engagement were noted in science practicals; formative feedback on students' work was an area for further development

All science inspections from the period to which this report refers evaluated schools' engagement with the new *Junior Cycle Science* specification which commenced in schools in September 2016. Inspectors found that the overall quality of teaching was good or very good in 95% of those inspections. Science teachers had begun to incorporate enquiry-based teaching methodologies more often into lessons, and this enabled students to think critically about scientific concepts.

The overall quality of learning in Science was good or very good in 92% of subject inspections. While levels of student engagement in practical lessons were high, students were often less active in lessons when practical work did not occur and content was presented by the teacher rather than discussed and analysed by students. During the early stages of the new specification, some lessons were structured very similarly to how they might have been when the previous Junior Certificate syllabus was in operation. The prevalence of these approaches reduced over time, particularly as JCT training became more readily available, and after a full three-year cycle of the specification was completed.

The overall quality of assessment in Science was found to be good or very good in 81% of science inspections. Where there were concerns regarding assessment, the main issue was often that classroom based assessment (CBA) skills, particularly those in the second Science CBA relating to research skills, were not a feature of lessons. Features of Quality produced by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) for Subject Learning and Assessment Review (SLAR)[8] meetings were often shared with students. However, formative feedback on how students could improve their work was identified as an area in which practice could be developed further. Questioning strategies, peer assessment and the creation of a better balance between formative and summative assessment were also identified as areas in need of improvement in Science.

---

8   *SLAR meetings enable teachers to collaboratively reach consistency in their judgements of students' work against common, externally-set Features of Quality.*

Irish students performed well in science elements of international assessments

Results from *PISA 2018* indicate that students in Ireland were significantly above the OECD average in Science, with significantly fewer low-performing students in Ireland compared to the average across OECD countries.

TIMSS 2019 results indicate that, while students in Ireland significantly outperformed students in twenty-three countries, seven countries had significantly higher mean science scores than Ireland.

While Ireland's performance in *PISA 2018* and *TIMSS 2019* was broadly positive, the proportion of very high achieving students was lower in Ireland than in most high-performing countries and the overall data indicates that there is still scope to improve outcomes for high achieving learners in STEM subjects.

5.3.7 HOME ECONOMICS

Teaching and learning in Home Economics were of a high standard overall; assessment practices were in need of further development

Home Economics is offered as an optional subject at Junior Cycle and Leaving Certificate levels.

The overall quality of teaching was good or very good in 89% of home economics inspections. The overall quality of learning was good or very good in 82% of these subject inspections. In such instances, high-quality learning experiences were observed in practical lessons where the design brief process was used incrementally to develop theoretical, practical and procedural skills. Teachers made effective use of demonstrations to model skills and enhance students' understanding and participation. Teachers' ongoing monitoring of students' progress, together with the provision of formative feedback, enabled students to develop and refine their knowledge and skills. The identification of success criteria facilitated students to reflect on and evaluate their own work and the work of their peers.

Student engagement in learning was good or very good in 86% of the home economics lessons observed. High levels of engagement were typically observed when students saw their learning as relevant to their personal and family lives and when students were supported to identify links between their prior knowledge and the new material being explored. The learning for students was optimised when, and where, challenging lesson tasks provided opportunities for them to apply their knowledge and skills to reflect on practical real-world household problems.

The overall quality of assessment was found to be less than good in 27% of home economics inspections. In such cases, students were typically not provided with sufficient opportunities during lessons to articulate and consolidate their learning and/or regular written formative feedback was not provided on their work. Highly effective summative assessment practice was noted in instances where the range of assessment modes facilitated feedback on students' progress in both the theoretical and practical coursework components.

Data from state examinations in the period 2016 to 2020 shows a significant increase in the uptake of higher level Home Economics in Senior Cycle (Table 5.20). The proportion of students taking higher level in Junior Certificate Home Economics also increased steadily.

Table 5.20: Numbers of students taking Home Economics examination in Leaving Certificate and Junior Certificate: 2016-2020

Year	Leaving Certificate Home Economics			Junior Certificate Home Economics		
	Higher level	**Ordinary level**	**Total candidates**	**Higher level**	**Ordinary level**	**Total candidates**
2020	85.5%	14.5%	11,988	N/A*	N/A	N/A
2019	81.1%	18.9%	12,002	85.4%	14.6%	23,043
2018	79.5%	20.5%	11,558	84.6%	15.4%	22,644
2017	79.7%	20.3%	11,814	84.8%	15.2%	22,257
2016	75.2%	24.8%	11,642	83.5%	16.5%	21,464

Source: State Examinations Commission
* As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Junior Cycle 2020 examinations were cancelled.

Subject provision and whole-school support for Home Economics was of a very high standard overall; timetabling was an area for improvement

Inspectors found that the overall quality of subject provision and whole-school support was good or very good in a very high proportion of subject inspections. Inspectors noted well-maintained facilities and stimulating learning environments that showcased students' work. Access to the subject was optimal where subject option bands, based on students' preferences, were created. Difficulties in recruiting suitably-qualified teachers of Home Economics was an issue noted in some reports. Timetabling arrangements that were less than optimal in facilitating practical lessons in food studies were noted in a number of reports. In some instances, for example, there was inadequate time to facilitate student participation and learning in practical food-studies lessons because the timetable was constructed around one-hour lesson periods.

Preparation and planning for home economics teaching and learning were of a high standard overall; planning for Home Economics in Junior Cycle was an area for development

Inspectors found well-organised subject departments in most of the schools visited. There were many examples of collaborative practice evident through the sharing of resources and expertise. Inspectors noted highly-effective practice when teachers' reflections informed improvements in teaching and learning. The _Junior Cycle Home Economics_ specification was introduced in 2018 and was due to be examined in 2021. However, the full implementation of the specification has been impacted due to the revised assessment arrangements arising from the COVID-19 pandemic. Inspectors noted that planning for the implementation of the _Junior Cycle Home Economics_ specification in schools is in the early stages of development. To support teachers in delivering the specification, inspectors have recommended frequently that, in designing units of learning, an incremental and integrated approach to the development of cognitive, practical and procedural skills be adopted. In addition, in order to ensure that the intended learning has taken place, units of learning should be inclusive of the modes of assessment which are aligned to the chosen learning outcomes.

5.3.8 THE TECHNOLOGY SUBJECTS

This section combines the four technology subjects: _Applied Technology_ and _Leaving Certificate Technology_; _Engineering_; _Graphics_ and _Design and Communication Graphics_ (DCG); and _Wood Technology_ and _Construction Studies_.

Data from state examinations in the period 2016 to 2020 shows a significant increase in the uptake of higher level in Senior Cycle Technology Subjects (Table 5.21 - Table 5.24). Uptake of the corresponding Junior Certificate subjects at higher level remained steady. The Junior Cycle specifications for Applied Technology, Engineering, Graphics and Wood Technology will be examined for the first time in 2022.

Table 5.21: Numbers of students taking Technology examination in Leaving Certificate and in Junior Certificate Examination: 2016-2020

Year	Leaving Certificate Technology			Junior Certificate Technology		
	Higher level	Ordinary level	Total candidates	Higher level	Ordinary level	Total candidates
2020	91.3%	8.7%	1,857	N/A*	N/A	N/A
2019	90.6%	9.4%	1,871	85.5%	14.5%	4,575
2018	93.2%	6.8%	1,534	87.8%	12.2%	4,070
2017	89.5%	10.5%	1,527	88.5%	11.5%	3,576
2016	87.9%	12.1%	1,415	88.2%	11.8%	3,576

Source: State Examinations Commission
* As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Junior Cycle 2020 examinations were cancelled.

Table 5.22: Numbers of students taking Engineering examination in Leaving Certificate and Metalwork examination in Junior Certificate: 2016-2020

Year	Leaving Certificate Engineering			Junior Certificate Metalwork		
	Higher level	Ordinary level	Total candidates	Higher level	Ordinary level	Total candidates
2020	87.2%	12.8%	6,105	N/A	N/A	N/A
2019	88.0%	12.0%	5,415	80.5%	19.5%	7,997
2018	88.8%	11.2%	5,254	80.2%	19.8%	8,035
2017	86.9%	13.1%	5,275	79.6%	20.4%	7,824
2016	83.5%	16.5%	5,379	79.3%	20.7%	7,887

Source: State Examinations Commission

Table 5.23: Numbers of students taking Design and Communication Graphics (DCG) examination in Leaving Certificate and Technical Graphics examination in Junior Certificate: 2016-2020

Year	Leaving Certificate DCG			Junior Certificate Technical Graphics		
	Higher level	Ordinary level	Total candidates	Higher level	Ordinary level	Total candidates
2020	83.6%	16.4%	5,646	N/A	N/A	N/A
2019	81.7%	18.3%	5,591	71.8%	28.2%	13,665
2018	83.1%	16.9%	5,393	72.4%	27.6%	13,046
2017	79.7%	20.3%	5,575	71.8%	28.2%	12,412
2016	78.8%	21.2%	5,523	72.8%	27.2%	11,931

Source: State Examinations Commission

Table 5.24: Numbers of students taking Construction Studies examination in Leaving Certificate and Materials Technology (Wood) examination in Junior Certificate: 2016-2020

Year	Leaving Certificate Construction Studies			Junior Certificate Materials Technology (Wood)		
	Higher level	Ordinary level	Total candidates	Higher level	Ordinary level	Total candidates
2020	88.2%	11.8%	9,709	N/A	N/A	N/A
2019	87.6%	12.4%	9,010	82.2%	17.8%	17,886
2018	86.1%	13.9%	8,248	83.8%	16.2%	17,467
2017	85.2%	14.8%	8,750	82.8%	17.2%	17,083
2016	82.9%	17.1%	8,553	83.2%	16.8%	16,381

Source: State Examinations Commission

Teaching and learning in the technology subjects were of a high quality. The use of digital technology to support learning was a strength noted in many inspection reports in these subjects

Inspection findings on the quality of teaching and learning in the four Technology subjects were very reassuring. Inspectors found the overall quality of students' learning in the four subjects to be good or very good in 98% of subject inspections. The overall quality of teaching was also found to be good or very good in 98% of these inspections.

The use of digital technology to support learning was a strength noted in many of the inspections across the four subject areas. Visualisers, parametric modelling software, 3D printers and presentation software were used to encourage student participation. As noted in a small number of inspection reports, this effective practice was extended by teachers in cases where students had access to an online content-sharing platform. Such platforms were used to share recordings of demonstrations as an additional way to support students, including those who were absent from lessons.

The four Junior Cycle technology subjects were introduced in September 2019 and excellent progress has been made with regard to subject planning, and the placing of the student at the centre of the planning process. A number of inspection reports commented positively on the comprehensive programmes of work that had been developed to provide detail about learning outcomes, resources, teaching methodologies and modes of assessment. In particular, reports commented on effective use of the *'double-diamond'* planning resource, developed by the Junior Cycle for Teachers (JCT), to plan units of learning that had a focus on developing students' skills rather than on just covering content.

High-quality oral feedback in the technology subjects should be complemented by constructive and developmental written feedback

The practical nature of the technology subjects leads to much rich interaction between teachers and students and among students themselves. Most of the inspection reports noted that teachers provided very good oral formative feedback to students. However, this feedback was often not recorded, and opportunities to reinforce learning were not utilised. As a result, the use of assessment to support learning was found to be less than good in 26% of the lessons observed. To ensure the incremental development of key learning skills, such as critical thinking, creativity and freehand sketching (graphical communication), students should be encouraged to record and reflect on their design journeys from conception to realisation on all projects. Teachers should also provide detailed written formative feedback on this work to support students' learning and to enable them to assess their own work.

5.3.9 PHYSICAL EDUCATION

There have been significant curriculum developments in post-primary Physical Education

During the period to which this report refers, considerable changes occurred in the _Physical Education (PE) curriculum_ at Senior Cycle and Junior Cycle. The _Leaving Certificate PE specification_ (examination) and the _Senior Cycle PE Framework_ (non-examination) were introduced in a small number of schools from September 2018, with both the specification and framework available to all schools from September 2020.

Physical Education is one of the main pillars of Wellbeing at Junior Cycle

The _Framework for Junior Cycle_ (2015) provides for a new area of learning at Junior Cycle called _Wellbeing_, with Physical Education (PE) as one of the main pillars. Wellbeing forms part of each year of Junior Cycle, and makes the school's culture, ethos and commitment to wellbeing central to the students' experiences. This includes learning opportunities to enhance the physical, mental, emotional and social wellbeing of students. It enables students to build life skills and to develop a strong sense of connectedness to their peers and to their community. The Junior Cycle Wellbeing programme began with 300 hours of timetabled engagement in 2017 and it will increase to 400 hours by 2022 as the Junior Cycle is implemented fully in schools (_Junior Cycle Wellbeing Guidelines 2021_).

Currently, four options are available to inform the provision of PE in Junior Cycle: the NCCA short course in PE (100 hours), a school-designed short course (100 hours), other units of PE developed by the school, or the _Junior Cycle PE Syllabus_ (2003). In June 2020, data began to emerge which indicated that the options for Junior Cycle PE were causing confusion, the reporting mechanisms were not clear and there was very poor uptake of the NCCA short course. The NCCA published the _Background Paper and Brief for the Review of Junior Cycle Physical Education_ (2021) to address these problems. The paper presented an overview of the experience of PE from a wide range of stakeholders and recommended the development of a new Junior Cycle PE programme (135 hours). A Junior Cycle PE development group was convened by the NCCA and a draft Junior Cycle PE specification was created.

Students enjoy their learning in Physical Education

Findings from the PE lessons observed in subject inspections between September 2016 and December 2020 showed that high levels of student enjoyment and motivation were evident in 89% of cases. Subject inspection reports in PE indicate that active learning, high levels of motivation and well-designed lesson tasks, supported by good classroom routines, were observed regularly by inspectors. In most instances, a formative assessment culture was evident in the lessons. Some reports highlighted the lack of provision of learning experiences for students in the physical activity areas of adventure activities and land-based or water-based aquatics. This aligns with the _Children's Sport Participation and Physical Activity Study 2018_ (CSPPA, 2018) findings in relation to swimming ability.

The use of digital learning technologies, a required component of the Leaving Certificate PE specification, was noted as an area for improvement. Where digital technologies were not utilised to support student learning, it was often due to the fact that the PE facilities were not equipped with Wi-Fi, mobile devices, a projector or a laptop. Other recommendations emerging frequently from PE inspection reports referenced the need for the recruitment of appropriately-qualified PE teachers, the appropriate timetabling of PE in line with the relevant Department circulars, access to public swimming facilities and the development of on-site PE facilities.

Plans are in place for the continued development of physical education facilities in post-primary schools

There are plans in place for the continued development of teaching and learning facilities for PE. The government is committed to a PE Hall build and modernisation programme, starting in the second half of the _National Development Plan (2021 – 2030)_ period. This will support an increased focus on the upgrade and refurbishment of the existing school stock to ensure that students in all post-primary schools have access to appropriate facilities to support PE learning experiences.

A new room layout[9], which provides a student-centred learning environment, was introduced in January 2021 to replace the Fitness Suite, a less flexible space with fixed exercise equipment. This new room layout was designed to support teachers in the implementation of the new PE specifications. The _Physical Education Equipment List_ for post-primary PE, including provision for outdoor equipment and facilities, was reviewed and updated in April 2021, with the intention of supporting the delivery of PE and providing enhanced equipment specifications. Work is ongoing on the development of a specialist PE equipment list for special schools, and it is expected that this will be ready in early 2022.

Physical activity in post-primary schools is being supported by national research and initiatives

The _Children's Sport Participation and Physical Activity Study 2018_ (CSPPA) provided rich insights into the experiences of children and adolescents around their participation in physical activity, sport and physical education. The study involved some 6,600 students from 115 schools across the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. Findings indicated that eighty-nine minutes per week was the average time allocated to physical education lessons in Irish post-primary schools. However, it is concerning that 12% of post-primary students reported being unable to swim; this aligns with data gathered by inspectors in PE subject inspections. The research carried out in relation to physical activity levels among post-primary students indicates the importance of high-quality physical education in equipping students with the knowledge, skills and understanding to be physically active in their daily lives.

Two national initiatives/programmes aimed at promoting physical activity are having a positive impact: the _Active School Flag_ and _I-PARC_. Schools that are involved in these initiatives are promoting physical activity across the whole school community.

The Active School Flag is a Department of Education initiative supported by _Healthy Ireland_, and is part of the _National Physical Activity Plan_. The Active School Flag initiative provides schools with a framework to guide and support them towards achieving a physically active school community. Since 2018, six post-primary schools have been working with the Department and the University of Limerick to co-design a new

9   Department of Education (2020) Post-primary Room Layouts. Available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/99dfd-post-primary-room-layouts/

whole-school programme, with student voice and student leadership at its core. This programme aligns with the _Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice 2018–2023_, the _Junior Cycle Wellbeing Guidelines_ and the _School Self-Evaluation Guidelines 2016-2020 Post-Primary_. The programme encourages school leaders, teachers and students to work together to collect data on physical activity levels in the school and to develop a school-specific action plan that focuses on inclusive whole-school physical activity events.

Established in 2018, _I-PARC_ involves multiple stakeholders, including the Department, working together to apply insight, intelligence, and innovation to the challenge of getting more people to become more active. The challenge of how to increase the physical activity levels of the population of Ireland needs a unified approach, both in Ireland and internationally. The I-PARC team is engaging with schools to develop evaluation tools for physical activity that are based on the existing I-PARC Evaluation Toolkit and are customised to meet the interests and needs of schools.

Physical Education and physical activity were impacted negatively by the COVID-19 pandemic

The provision of PE was deeply impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic from March 2020, due to school closures and the requirement for physical distancing. The Department advice suggested that, where practical, PE lessons should take place outdoors. In relation to contact and invasion games on the curriculum, schools were advised to avoid the contact elements as much as possible and to focus on the development of sport-specific skills.

The results of a parental survey, conducted in April 2020[10] during the first period of school closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic, were reassuring; almost four-fifths (79%) of parents who responded reported that their child took regular opportunities to exercise. However, the situation was not as positive during the second period of school closure in January and February 2021. In surveys conducted during this period[11], almost one-third (30%) of post-primary parents indicated that their child did not exercise regularly. Over a quarter (27%) of post-primary students also indicated in surveys at this time[12] that they only exercised sometimes; 12% of students indicated that they did not exercise regularly.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) recommends that young people engage in at least sixty minutes a day of moderate to vigorous physical activity. Data from the WHO[13] indicates that, in 2016, 72% of adolescents in Ireland did not meet these recommended levels of physical activity. This is a concern, since regular physical activity provides a host of health benefits[14], from improved heart and respiratory fitness to better cognitive function which supports learning and knowledge acquisition. Notably, research from the Irish post-primary context[15] during the COVID-19 pandemic found that, _half of the adolescents reported less physical activity than normal, hence progress towards national and WHO targets to decrease inactivity by 15% by 2030 have been severely hampered by the COVID-19 pandemic_. This key piece of new research, once again highlights a particular need in relation to our young people becoming physically educated citizens by ensuring that they are provided with high-quality learning opportunities during their time in post-primary school.

10 Department of Education (2021) Results of survey of parents of post-primary students, April 2020, Remote Teaching and Learning, Summary of Inspectorate Research, January – February 2021 (Appendix). Available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/de987-remote-teaching-and-learning-reports/

11 Department of Education (2021) Remote teaching and learning: Report on a survey of parents in post-primary schools. Department of Education (2021). Available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/de987-remote-teaching-and-learning-reports/

12 Department of Education (2021) Remote teaching and learning: Report on a survey of students in post-primary schools. Available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/de987-remote-teaching-and-learning-reports/

13 https://www.who.int/news/item/22-11-2019-new-who-led-study-says-majority-of-adolescents-worldwide-are-not-sufficiently-physically-active-putting-their-current-and-future-health-at-risk

14 See, for example: https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK201501/

15 Ng, K., Cooper J., McHale F., Clifford, J. and Woods, C. (2020) Barriers and facilitators to changes in adolescent physical activity during COVID-19, BMJ Open Sport & Exercise Medicine 6(1). Available at: https://bmjopensem.bmj.com/content/6/1/e000919

5.3.10 SOCIAL, PERSONAL AND HEALTH EDUCATION

Teaching and learning in Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) was generally of a good standard; student enjoyment, motivation and engagement were key features of SPHE lessons

SPHE in Junior Cycle is one of the pillar subjects of Wellbeing. It aims to provide students with key skills to develop a positive sense of themselves and their physical, social, emotional and spiritual health and wellbeing. It also aims to build their capacity to develop and maintain healthy relationships through *Relationships and Sexuality Education* (RSE). While SPHE is currently an optional subject in Senior Cycle, the RSE component is mandatory for all students for all year groups. SPHE inspections evaluate provision and delivery of both SPHE and RSE programmes in schools.

SPHE inspectors found that the quality of teaching and learning in SPHE and RSE was generally good. Inspectors found that the quality of students' learning in SPHE was good or very good in 72% of the inspections carried out, while the overall quality of teaching was good or very good in 75% of these inspections.

Experiential learning should be used more effectively in SPHE to develop students' attitudes, values and behaviours and the skills to apply their learning to new situations

Noteworthy practice observed by inspectors during SPHE inspections included very good opportunities for students to work collaboratively with their peers and to be active in their learning. The lessons observed were, overall, student-centred with a positive class atmosphere, and students engaged well and were motivated to learn. A key recommendation in SPHE inspections was to introduce, or further exploit, experiential learning opportunities for students in order to maximise the benefits of this learning cycle to develop students' attitudes, values and behaviours, as well as the skills to apply their learning in new contexts.

Assessment in SPHE should be developed further and should include agreed approaches to monitoring and reporting on students' learning

Assessment was good or very good in 47% of lessons observed. It was an area for significant improvement in 11% of lessons observed, where the quality of assessment was evaluated as less than satisfactory. While some informal assessment practices, questioning and student self-reflection were observed in the majority of lessons, there were generally limited opportunities for students to maintain relevant activity records and to reflect formally on their learning. Consequently, it was difficult to assess overall student progress and achievement in SPHE. In order to bring about improvement, inspectors recommended the use of formative assessment strategies including the development and implementation of agreed approaches to monitoring and reporting on student learning.

Areas for improvement in SPHE included the deployment of appropriately-trained teachers, and the consistent implementation of a high-quality, targeted relationships and sexuality education programme in Senior Cycle

The quality of planning for the implementation of SPHE and RSE was generally good in Junior Cycle. Key factors that supported high-quality planning were the establishment of a core team of SPHE teachers with the requisite training and expertise in the subject, the appointment of a subject co-ordinator, and the facilitation of adequate collaborative planning time. In Senior Cycle, planning for RSE varied significantly. High-quality planning was recommended frequently for Senior Cycle RSE, supported by the ratification of a strong RSE policy, appropriately trained teachers and the development of a discrete, time-bound programme for RSE.

5.3.11 BUSINESS

Business subjects remain a popular option, despite the lack of recent curriculum changes in Accounting and Business at Senior Cycle

The business subjects in post-primary schools are comprised of _Business Studies_ in Junior Cycle, and _Business_, _Accounting_ and _Economics_ in Senior Cycle. Data from state examinations in the period 2016 to 2020 shows a significant increase in the uptake of business subjects in Senior Cycle (Table 5.26). The Junior Cycle Business specification was examined for the first time in 2019. Up to that point, the uptake of Junior Certificate higher level Business Studies had seen slight increases year-on-year (Table 5.25). It is of note that the syllabi for Accounting and Business at Senior Cycle have not been revised for a significant period of time, since 1996 and 1997 respectively. This presents a challenge for teachers and students, particularly given the dynamic nature of these two subjects.

Table 5.25: Numbers of students taking Business examination in Leaving Certificate and Business Studies examination in Junior Cycle: 2016-2020

Year	Leaving Certificate Business			Junior Cycle/Junior Certificate Business Studies		
	Higher level	Ordinary level	Total candidates	Higher level	Ordinary level	Total candidates
2020	85.0%	15.0%	17,901	N/A*	N/A	N/A
2019	79.7%	20.3%	17,326	Common level		36,267
2018	78.6%	21.4%	16,967	79.9%	20.1%	34,845
2017	75.2%	24.8%	17,573	79.1%	20.9%	34,497
2016	72.0%	28.0%	17,453	78.0%	22.0%	33,538

Source: State Examinations Commission
* As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Junior Cycle 2020 examinations were cancelled.

Table 5.26: Numbers of students taking Accounting and Economics examinations in Leaving Certificate: 2016- 2020

Year	Leaving Certificate Accounting			Leaving Certificate Economics		
	Higher level	Ordinary level	Total candidates	Higher level	Ordinary level	Total candidates
2020	77.9%	22.1%	8,106	88.4%	11.6%	5,746
2019	77.1%	22.9%	7,907	85.1%	14.9%	5,863
2018	77.7%	22.3%	7,148	85.8%	14.2%	5,765
2017	77.9%	22.1%	6,904	85.0%	15.0%	5,856
2016	73.5%	26.5%	6,626	81.1%	18.9%	5,713

Source: State Examinations Commission

Business inspection reports were broadly positive with regard to students' learning

In subject inspections of business subjects, the overall quality of teaching was found to be good or very good in 91% of schools inspected during the period to which this report refers. The overall quality of learning was found to be good or very good in 94% of schools inspected.

Students' engagement in learning was good or very good in 87% of lessons. Inspections of business subjects reported regularly on students' engagement in active and co-operative learning. In most instances, it was found that these approaches to learning were successful in activating and developing key skills among students. The findings indicated that teaching approaches were good or very good in 90% of lessons. In a minority of cases, it was found that students would benefit from more opportunities to engage actively and collaboratively with the lesson content.

Learning in business subjects was supported by digital technologies and non classroom-based activities

The use of digital technologies was found to be widespread in business lessons, and the integration of these technologies was generally achieved in a way that supported and augmented students' engagement and learning. Involvement in co-curricular and extra-curricular activities which enhanced students' engagement with the business world also featured regularly.

Other teaching and learning areas highlighted included the successful integration of strategies to further develop students' literacy and numeracy skills, and the effective use of questioning strategies by teachers, which supported differentiated learning in mixed-ability settings.

Formative assessment is an area for improvement in business subjects

Some of the challenges referenced in business subject inspection reports related to aspects of formative assessment, particularly the provision of written formative feedback to students on how they could improve their work. The use of students' own work and business experience as exemplar material in lessons was an aspect of assessment that also required attention. Such an approach allows students to learn from the successes and challenges of their peers.

5.3.12 ART

Teaching and learning in Art were of a very high standard overall; the development of technical skills should be balanced with creative and critical thinking skills

Subject inspections in Art found that the overall quality of teaching and learning in Art was of a very high standard; the quality of students' learning in Art was good or very good in 92% of subject inspections. In 92% of these inspections, the overall quality of teaching was good or very good.

Noteworthy features in the art lessons observed included very good opportunities for students to develop strong technical skills in a range of media and areas of practice, as well as opportunities to experiment and explore, and to use primary sources as stimuli. A key recommendation made by inspectors was for art departments to ensure that the development of technical skills was balanced appropriately with the creative and critical thinking skills needed to process ideas in Art.

Data from state examinations in the 2016 to 2020 period shows a steady increase in the uptake of higher level _Art_ in Senior Cycle and _Art, Craft and Design_ in the Junior Certificate (Table 5.27). The _Junior Cycle Visual Art_ specification was introduced for first year students in 2018.

Table 5.27: Numbers of students taking Art examination in Leaving Certificate and Art, Craft & Design examination in Junior Certificate 2016-2020

Year	Leaving Certificate Art			Junior Certificate Art, Craft & Design		
	Higher level	Ordinary level	Total candidates	Higher level	Ordinary level	Total candidates
2020	84.4%	15.6%	9,616	N/A*	N/A	N/A
2019	83.0%	17.0%	9,185	77.1%	22.9%	19,993
2018	80.6%	19.4%	9,046	77.6%	22.4%	19,798
2017	82.2%	17.8%	9,408	76.5%	23.5%	20,214
2016	79.9%	20.1%	9,754	75.2%	24.8%	20,715

Source: State Examinations Commission
* As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Junior Cycle 2020 examinations were cancelled.

High-quality learning experiences were provided in Art; feedback on students' work-in-progress was an area for improvement

Typically, high quality learning experiences were evident in art lessons when students had opportunities to explore and experiment, and use a wide range of areas of practice. In these instances, students demonstrated a good understanding of the importance of using primary sources to problem solve and enhance their creativity. When students understood the benefits of investigating physical objects that were meaningful and interesting to them, they made a clear connection between using primary sources and developing ideas in an imaginative way.

Very good rapport between teachers and students, as well as high levels of affirmation for achievement, were among the key features observed regularly in subject inspections of Art.

Assessment in Art was found to be good or very good in 79% of subject inspections. While written formative feedback was often provided for completed artwork, the need to provide such feedback on work-in-progress was identified frequently by inspectors as an area for development in lessons. Inspection reports also identified that, in many cases, students needed to be encouraged to consider the feedback being provided to them, to reflect on it, and then to use it to progress and improve their work. Very good practice was noted where students used annotation to self-evaluate and plan for their own improvement.

Learning spaces were generally well organised, with effective routines in place to support learning. Subject provision and whole school support for Art were generally very good, with artwork exhibited to very good effect in art rooms and in designated areas around schools; such practice enhances student learning, promotes the subject of Art, and sets high expectations for students' achievement.

5.3.13 MUSIC

Teaching, learning and assessment in Music were of a very high standard overall

The Junior Cycle _Music_ curriculum comprises three interconnected strands: procedural knowledge; innovate and ideate; and culture and context. The curriculum focuses on giving students the opportunity to develop their musical knowledge, skills and cultural awareness through practical and cognitive engagement with music. At Leaving Certificate level, the course promotes an awareness of music through the development of listening, performing and composing skills. The course also promotes the use of school and community resources to facilitate the exploration of music in a manner that is both meaningful and relevant to students. Data from state examinations in the 2016 to 2020 period indicates that there was a small increase in the numbers of students studying music in Junior Cycle and Senior Cycle (Table 5.28). While the uptake of higher level Music in the Junior Certificate remained steady, there was a small increase in the uptake of higher level Music in Senior Cycle.

Inspection findings on the quality of teaching and learning in Music were very positive. Inspectors found the overall quality of teaching, learning and assessment to be good or very good in all schools in which a subject inspection of Music took place.

Students engaged regularly in practical music-making activities and the repertoire chosen for performance was age and ability appropriate, while the approaches chosen contributed to the quality of learning. In most cases, subject provision and whole-school support were found to be very good, and students had access to a variety of extra-curricular and co-curricular activities related to Music.

Table 5.28: Numbers of students taking Music examination in Leaving Certificate and in Junior Certificate: 2016-2020

Year	Leaving Certificate			Junior Certificate		
	Higher level	Ordinary level	Total candidates	Higher level	Ordinary level	Total candidates
2020	93.8%	6.2%	6,936	N/A*	N/A	N/A
2019	93.6%	6.4%	6,659	83.8%	16.2%	10,828
2018	92.8%	7.2%	6,383	84.5%	15.5%	10,562
2017	93.0%	7.0%	6,519	84.8%	15.2%	10,932
2016	91.6%	8.4%	6,597	84.0%	16.0%	10,778

Source: State Examinations Commission
* As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Junior Cycle 2020 examinations were cancelled.

Music Generation, a national partnership programme, complements the music curriculum in participating schools

Music is studied by approximately 25% of students in first year. This drops off to around 17% in second and third year. The higher proportion of students studying Music in first year is likely to be a result of schools offering taster programmes in a range of subjects on entry to first year. At Senior Cycle, approximately 11% of students study Music. To complement the curriculum, schools have the option of participating in *Music Generation*, a national partnership programme that is partly funded by the Department. Through this partnership, Music Generation creates rich and diverse ways for children and young people to engage in vocal and instrumental tuition delivered by skilled professional musicians, across all musical genres and styles.

Significant strengths in approaches to teaching Music exist; more integration of musical components is required in lessons

Teaching approaches were found to be good or very good in 92% of lessons observed during subject inspections of Music. Student engagement was good or very good in 95% of lessons, and there was very good teacher-student rapport. Students' expertise and talents were often embedded in the learning process, allowing the teacher to easily occupy the role of facilitator and enabler of learning. In many lessons, the wide range of student ability was catered for through well-structured and varied activities, carefully thought-out resources and effective questioning strategies.

A recommendation in a number of inspections was that students should experience the three components of Music in an integrated manner in lessons. It was also recommended that teachers should ensure that performing and listening were integrated into composing to help students develop their knowledge and understanding of the composing process further. Another frequent recommendation was for teachers to use the 'sound before symbol' methodology consistently in lessons, where teachers ensure that when introducing notation, students hear the sound of each note before being introduced to the theory.

COVID-19 curtailed the delivery of aspects of the music curriculum

The need for schools to implement social-distancing because of COVID-19 curtailed their delivery of aspects of the music specifications during the September to December 2020 period. In line with public health advice, the Department advised schools that singing indoors and the playing of wind and brass instruments should be minimised due to the additional risk of infection. It also advised schools that larger extra-curricular school groups, such as choirs and wind and brass ensembles, be avoided. In terms of developing performance skills, schools were advised that it may be necessary for teachers to demonstrate and model a skill which students would then practise at home, record their efforts and submit them to their teacher online.

5.3.14 GUIDANCE

Guidance in post-primary schools is a whole-school activity that is integrated into all Junior and Senior Cycle programmes. It encompasses three separate, but interlinked, areas: personal and social development, educational guidance and career guidance. Guidance is provided to students through a variety of approaches including taught modules, weekly lessons, one-to-one and small group guidance counselling sessions, complemented by planned co-curricular activities.

Since 2016, there has been a significant increase in whole-school provision of personal development programmes such as the *FRIENDS Resilience* programmes and other evidence based anxiety prevention and resilience building programmes for students. Comprehensive induction programmes to support primary pupils in their transition to post-primary have been introduced in almost all schools. In 2020, the Department of Education National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) developed a comprehensive suite of advice and wellbeing resources for parents, students and school staff to support them during COVID-19.[16]

---

16 *The resources developed by NEPS are available at https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/52642-supporting-the-wellbeing-of-school-communities-as-schools-reopen-guidance-for-schools/#resources-and-support-for-school-communities*

Learning in guidance lessons was of high quality; assessment practices varied

In subject inspections of Guidance, the overall quality of teaching during guidance lessons was found to be good or very good in 92% of schools inspected. The overall quality of learning was found to be good or very good in 90% of schools inspected. High-quality questioning strategies supported high levels of student engagement in lessons, and students were well informed about how to research and evaluate potential education and career options and pathways. Students were positive about the value of guidance lessons.

The quality of assessment of learning in Guidance was more varied, ranging from satisfactory in 15% of schools to good in 64%, to very good in 12%. It was found that, while students at Senior Cycle submitted a small number of valuable guidance-related assignments, assessment of learning in Guidance at Junior Cycle was not as well developed. To improve assessment practices, inspectors recommended more innovative and creative methods of assessing students' learning and progress in Guidance. Notwithstanding that students' experience in guidance lessons was found to be generally positive, inspectors recommended the incorporation of more collaborative activities for students during lessons.

Whole-school support for Guidance was of high quality, but the majority of schools had yet to formally establish a whole-school guidance planning team

Inspectors indicated that, in most schools, whole-school support for guidance was of high quality. Effective practice in this regard included the adoption of a _continuum of support model_ for all, some, and a few students. This well-integrated, collaborative, whole-school approach to supporting students involved a wide range of staff with specific roles and functions. Inspectors also noted that timetabled provision of guidance lessons and/or modules was generally working well with more structured and effective provision planned for at Senior Cycle. Since 2016, it was evident that increasing numbers of schools had introduced innovative modular guidance programmes at Junior Cycle under the umbrella of Wellbeing. While students in guidance groups had regular access to digital technology, the availability of devices remained an issue in a small number of schools. Other good practice in relation to whole-school provision included the establishment of very effective student support teams which facilitated an appropriate focus on student welfare and clear referral pathways, both internal and external. However, in relation to whole-school Guidance planning, inspectors noted that the majority of schools had not yet established a whole-school guidance planning team.

Challenges remain in provision for Guidance

Since 2016, the role of the guidance counsellor has become more complex, with increased pressure on guidance counsellors to deliver a comprehensive, holistic guidance support to students. School leaders and guidance counsellors reported increasingly high levels of anxiety among post-primary students. This has strained the capacity of the limited personal counselling service available in schools. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and recognising the particular importance of support for students in the COVID context, approximately 120 additional posts were provided for guidance to support student wellbeing in post-primary schools.

Other areas in which school leaders experienced difficulty include the recruitment of qualified guidance counsellors, due to the Department's requirement for dual professional qualifications, that of qualified post-primary teacher and post-primary guidance counsellor. Another challenge for some schools was finding effective ways of incorporating Guidance, as an area of learning, into Junior Cycle Wellbeing.

5.4 KEY MESSAGES

Student learning

- Irish students continue to perform well in international assessments in reading, Mathematics and Science; there is scope to improve outcomes for students with higher abilities, including exceptionally-able students.

- The proportion of students studying subjects at higher level has increased steadily in almost all subjects.

- Schools have made good progress in relation to whole-school literacy; vocabulary development and oral literacy were identified as areas for further development in inspections of English.

- The quality of student learning in Irish, while good or very good in the majority of schools, was significantly below the standards achieved in other core subjects.

- Levels of experiential and constructivist learning in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) subjects have increased; some of the findings from international assessments indicate that challenges in the teaching of Mathematics remain.

- Students had high quality learning experiences in Physical Education and Social, Personal and Health Education; such experiences are key to the maintenance and advancement of student wellbeing.

- The additional Guidance and Counselling resources provided in response to the COVID-19 pandemic are a welcome additional support for students; however, further system supports in Guidance and Counselling will be required.

Teaching and assessment

- The Junior Cycle Framework is being implemented successfully in many schools; cross-curricular sharing of expertise, focused on inclusive task design and the further alignment of subject department plans with the new subject specifications, are areas for development.

- Challenges remain in relation to how assessment is carried out, how assessment findings are used, and the quality of formative feedback that students receive; COVID-19 led to much new thinking in this area. The implementation of classroom based assessments (CBAs) in Junior Cycle has meant the use of a wider range of assessment approaches and has given teachers opportunities to engage in collaborative discussions and moderation meetings concerning students' achievements.

- High-quality learning environments, and high levels of student enjoyment and motivation are evident in post-primary schools; collaborative learning practices for students require further development.

- The use of information and communications technology as a teaching and learning tool became much more effective during the pandemic, having been underdeveloped prior to the pandemic.

5.5 LOOKING FORWARD

Promoting student achievement and better learning

- There is a need for all schools to use approaches that will help to increase the numbers of students achieving at the highest levels and address the needs of more able and exceptionally-able students.

- Whole-school strategies to enhance the quality of subject department planning are required; in particular, subject and programme plans should reflect greater alignment between learning outcomes, pedagogy and assessment.

- Further opportunities for students to engage in talk and discussion and to work collaboratively should be provided in lessons.

- Building on the experience of COVID-19 and the associated changes in assessment practices, schools should evaluate the ways in which assessment is carried out, how assessment data is used and how students are enabled to reflect on their progress as learners.

Provision for Irish

- There is a need for teachers to create additional opportunities for students to use Irish during lessons through their engagement in enjoyable, creative and stimulating tasks and activities; this is critical for effective language acquisition.

- Schools should prioritise action planning for Irish lessons incorporating the use of contemporary resources including digital technology, a range of active methodologies and effective assessment strategies which ensure that students are given regular feedback on their progress as language learners and clear direction on how to improve.

System development

- Curriculum design, teacher education and assessment policy, particularly in Mathematics, other STEM subjects and Business subjects, should take account of the need for students to develop dynamic problem-solving skills that will equip them to compete within a rapidly evolving and increasingly international labour market.

- Continued enhancement of system supports will be required in the area of Guidance and Counselling to address challenges related to recruitment, curriculum and increasing levels of anxiety among students.

6

Inclusion

6.1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents the findings of inspections during the September 2016 to December 2020 period in relation to targeted provision for the inclusion of children and young people with special educational needs (SEN), and those at risk of educational disadvantage. The opening section of the chapter provides an overview of developments related to policy, resource provision and practice in these areas in the 2016-2020 period. When considering the commentary on provision for special education, it is important to bear in mind that there are three distinct categories of pupils/students with special educational needs (SEN) as provided for across a continuum of provision: those in mainstream classes who receive additional support in-class and/or through withdrawal; those in special classes in mainstream schools; and those in special schools.

The chapter draws on data gathered during focused inspections of SEN provision and inspections of Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) action planning in DEIS schools, as well as whole-school evaluations, curriculum evaluations and subject inspections that were carried out in the 2016-2020 period. It also draws from the findings of inspections of Youthreach centres, and inspections in schools attached to Special Care Units (SCUs) or the Children Detention Centre (CDC), as well as a number of composite reports that the Inspectorate published during this period.

During the September 2016 to December 2020 period, there was extensive resource provision and policy development in support of educational inclusion[1] and provision for children and young people with SEN or who were at risk of educational disadvantage. Inspection findings indicate that many aspects of provision for these pupils/students in schools were either good or very good. It is also evident that there was scope to develop a number of important aspects of provision, such as those relating to action planning, enrolment and attendance. These are essential in meeting the needs of all children and young people, and in supporting their inclusion in educational settings in accordance with Department policy.

During the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, there was enhanced resource provision for children and young people with SEN and for those most at risk of educational disadvantage, both when schools were closed and also when schools re-opened. During the period of school closure and in advance of school re-opening in September 2020, the Department published specific guidance to support schools in providing for children and young people with SEN, and children and young people at risk of educational disadvantage. The findings of Inspectorate research conducted during the periods of school closure and re-opening during 2020 indicated that remote teaching impacted negatively on many children with SEN in particular, from both a learning and wellbeing perspective (see Chapter 10). The findings of an Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) report[2], produced in partnership with the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) in 2020, indicated that the disruption of learning was likely to have long-term consequences for many, especially for more disadvantaged children and young people. To help address the challenges that these pupils and students experienced, the Department established a range of specific summer programmes, significantly enhanced in comparison to previous years, in mainstream and special schools.

---

1   According to the NCSE's 2019 Progress Report – Policy Advice on Special Schools and Classes, an inclusive education has been interpreted as providing a continuum of educational provision that encompasses mainstream classes, special classes in mainstream schools and special schools. The report is available at: https://ncse.ie/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Progress-Report-Policy-Advice-on-Special-Schools-Classes-website-upload.pdf

2   Darmody, M., Smyth E. and Russell H. (2020) Implications of the COVID-19 Pandemic for Policy in Relation to Children and Young People. Available at: https://www.esri.ie/news/esri-report-finds-that-action-needed-to-address-the-short-and-longer-term-impacts-of-covid-19

Context

Extensive resource provision and policy development in the area of inclusion

Special Education
- A new model for allocating special education teaching resources to mainstream schools introduced in 2017
- A new inspection model focussing on special educational needs at post-primary level introduced in 2019
- **1,118** additional special education teachers
- **5,079** additional special needs assistants
- **730** additional special classes
- An additional **3,970** pupils/students enrolled in special classes
- **457** additional special classes for pupils/students with autism
- **451** additional pupils/students attending special schools
- **97** additional teachers employed in special schools

Educational Disadvantage
- The *DEIS Plan 2017* replaced the *DEIS Action Plan for Educational Inclusion* (2005)
- The School Excellence Fund established in 2017
- Funding provided for Emergency Reception and Orientation Centres as an interim measure
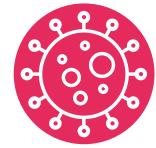
COVID-19 impacted significantly on children and young people with special educational needs and at most risk of educational disadvantage

Inspections and Reports

Special Educational Needs
- **Teaching and learning**: Good or very good in **96%** of SEN-focussed inspections in primary schools
- **Teaching**: Good or very good in **78%** of SEN-focussed inspections in post-primary schools
- **Learning**: Good or very good in **63%** of SEN-focussed inspections in post-primary schools
- **High levels of enjoyment and motivation** among pupils/students in **86%** of special classes and support settings

DEIS
- **98** evaluations of DEIS action planning for improvement
- Effective leadership of action planning for improvement in **69%** of schools
- **60** primary and **24** post-primary schools participated in the School Excellence Fund-DEIS initiative

Specialised provision
- **14** evaluations in schools attached to Children Detention Centres or Special Care Units
- **89** evaluations in Youthreach centres
- Effective teaching approaches in **78%** of Youthreach lessons observed

Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services
- All 4 schools attached to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services Units evaluated in 2019

Some key messages

There is a need to consider the level of inclusiveness of current provision

Enrolment policies in autism and other special classes should prioritise places for pupils/students with complex needs

Teachers' collaborative practices should be further developed to support the needs of learners with SEN

A particular focus on attendance and making learning interesting is required in DEIS schools

6.2. SPECIAL EDUCATION

6.2.1 PROVISION AND RESOURCING

The provision of education for children and young people with special educational needs is an ongoing priority for Government

The overall policy objective of the Department of Education is to promote inclusive education for children and young people with SEN in mainstream settings. Where this is not possible, the policy commitment is to provide for specialised settings through special-class or special-school placements. The vast majority of children and young people with SEN now attend mainstream schools with additional supports.[3] The Department's annual expenditure in the area of special education is considerable. In 2020, over 19% of the Department's overall budget was expended on special education.

There has been considerable growth in resources to support children and young people with special educational needs; the growth rates in special needs assistant provision are unprecedented

Over the period to which this report refers, there have been considerable increases in resources provided to schools to support pupils/students with SEN (Table 6.1). From September 2016 to December 2020, an additional 641 special education teachers were employed in primary schools, and an additional 477 in post-primary schools, representing a growth of 7.4% at primary level and 12.5% at post-primary level. These figures need to be seen in the context of growth rates of 0.55% in the total number of primary pupils in schools and 7.6% in the total number of students in post-primary schools. An additional 97 teachers were employed in special schools, representing a growth of 7.1%.

During this period, even higher growth rates were recorded in the number of special-needs assistants (SNAs) employed in schools. An additional 3,576 SNAs were employed in primary schools (an increase of 46%), an additional 361 SNAs in special schools (an increase of 15%) and an additional 1,142 SNAs in post-primary schools (an increase of 45%) (Table 6.1). This overall increase in the number of SNAs in the system relative to the pupil/student population was unprecedented.

---

3   Inspectorate, Department of Education (2016) Review of the pilot of a new Model for Allocating teaching resources to Mainstream Schools to Support pupils with Special Educational needs, p.1.
    Available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/inspectorate-publications-evaluation-reports-guidelines/?referrer=http://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Inspection-Reports-Publications/Evaluation-Reports-Guidelines/Review-of-the-Pilot-of-a-New-Model-for-Allocating-Teaching-Resources-for-Pupils-with-Special-Educational-Needs.pdf#special-needs

Table 6.1: Provision for children and young people with special educational needs: September 2016 - December 2020*

	Primary and special schools		Post-primary schools	
	2016	**2020**	**2016**	**2020**
Total number of teachers	35,669	38,604	26,273[4]	30,739
	8.2% increase		17.0% increase	
Number of special education teachers in mainstream schools	8,682[5]	9,323	3,819	4,296
	7.4% increase		12.5% increase	
Number of teachers in special schools	1,365	1,462	N/A	
	7.1% increase		N/A	
Number of special needs assistants in mainstream schools	2,371	2,732		
	15.2%			
Number of special classes in mainstream schools	814	1,321	294	517
	62.3% increase		75.9% increase	

Source: Statistics Section, Department of Education. Also see Education Indicators for Ireland 2021 available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/055810-education-statistics/#latest-statistical-reports

* Where relevant, figures are rounded to the nearest whole-time equivalent (WTE).

The National Council for Special Education reviewed the SNA scheme and proposed an alternative method of SNA allocation for schools. The need for a training programme for SNAs was also identified

In 2016, at the request of the then Minster for Education and Skills, the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) undertook a review of the SNA scheme and published comprehensive policy advice for the scheme in 2018.[6] The NCSE review reflected similar concerns to those that had been expressed in an earlier review[7] of SNA provision to which the Inspectorate contributed in 2011; essentially, this was that the provision of SNA assistance could have the effect of reducing the direct teacher-student contact time for children with SEN. The NCSE also concluded that the growth rates in SNA provision were unsustainable and proposed an alternative method of SNA allocation for schools. At the time of writing, the introduction of that new arrangement had been postponed from September 2020 to the beginning of the 2022/23 school year.

The need for a training programme for SNAs was also identified by the NCSE in its review of the SNA scheme. Following a public procurement process, University College Dublin (UCD) School of Education, in conjunction with UCD School of Nursing, Midwifery and Health Systems was selected to develop and deliver the programme. The _National Training Programme for Special Needs Assistants_ commenced in January 2021, with the enrolment of 500 SNAs in the first year. The programme, which is free of charge, is open to all SNAs working in primary, post-primary and special schools.

4   The figure for 2015/2016 quoted in the last Chief Inspector's Report was 26,804. This figure included teachers of Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) courses. PLC figures are not included in this table.

5   The number of special education teachers in 2016 includes both resource teachers and learning support teachers.

6   National Council for Special Education (NCSE) (2018) Comprehensive Review of the Special Needs Assistant Scheme: A New School Inclusion Model to Deliver the Right Supports at the Right Time to Students with Additional Care Needs. Available at: http://ncse.ie/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/NCSE-PAP6-Comprehensive-Review-SNA-Scheme.pdf

7   Department of Education (2011) A Value for Money Review of Expenditure on the Special Needs Assistant Scheme 2007/8 to 2010. Available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/value-for-money-reviews/

There has been substantial growth in the number of special classes at primary and post-primary levels

Over the timeframe to which this report refers, there has been a substantial increase in the number of special classes, with an additional 507 special classes in mainstream primary schools, representing a 62% increase, and an additional 223 special classes in post-primary schools, representing a 76% increase (Table 6.1). An additional 2,674 pupils were enrolled in special classes in primary schools, representing a 55% increase, while an additional 1,296 students were enrolled in special classes in post-primary schools, representing an 83% increase (Table 6.2).

The establishment of special classes for children and young people with autism accounts for the greatest rise in special classes. Since 2016, 427 new special classes for pupils with autism were provided at primary level and 178 provided for students at post-primary level. In the same period, the number of other additional special classes, such as classes for children and young people with specific speech and language disorders, remained broadly unchanged.

Table 6.2: Number of pupils/students in special classes in mainstream primary schools and post-primary schools 2016-2020

	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Pupils in special classes in mainstream primary schools	4,836	5,572	6,229	6,822	7,510
Students in special classes in post-primary schools	1,560	1,814	2,136	2,406	2,856

Source: Statistics Section, Department of Education. Education Indicators for Ireland 2021.
Available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/055810-education-statistics/#latest-statistical-reports

In contrast with the substantial growth in special classes in mainstream primary and post-primary schools, the number of special schools remained the same over the period to which this report refers (Table 6.3). There was a small increase (almost 6%) in the number of pupils/students in these schools.

Table 6.3: Number of pupils and teachers in special schools 2016-2020

	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Number of special schools (NCSE supported only)	114	114	114	114	114
Pupils in special schools	7,567	7,662	7,728	8,035	8,018
Teachers in special schools	1,365	1,387	1,400	1,435	1,462

Source: Statistics Section, Department of Education. Also see Education Indicators for Ireland 2021 available at:
https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/055810-education-statistics/#latest-statistical-reports

The National Council for Special Education is developing policy advice for the Minister in respect of special schools and special classes

The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) was asked by the Department to provide policy advice to the Minister in respect of special schools and special classes. In particular, it was asked to advise on the educational provision that should be in place for pupils/students in special schools and classes, and to make recommendations on the provision required to enable them to achieve better outcomes. As part of this process, the NCSE published a *Progress Report - Policy Advice on Special Schools and Classes* in 2019.

The report acknowledged the substantial investment made by the Department in special education, noting that almost 18% of the total education budget in 2019 was allocated to support pupils/students with special needs. According to the report, consultation groups agreed with the principle that all learners should be educated together. There was noticeably less agreement around whether this was achievable or even desirable for all learners, particularly those with the most complex needs.

In moving towards greater inclusion, the report highlighted that aspects of the current system would need to be adapted, for example, school buildings, pupil-teacher ratios, and psychological and therapy supports. It also noted that fundamental change would be required to initial and continuing teacher education. The NCSE deliberations in relation to the publication of a final report were ongoing at the time of publication of this Chief Inspector's report.

6.2.2 SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHER ALLOCATION MODEL

In January 2017, the then Minister for Education and Skills announced the introduction of a new model for allocating special education teaching resources to mainstream primary and post-primary schools. The special education teacher (SET) allocation model, which was introduced in schools from September 2017, was designed to provide a single unified allocation of teaching resources to each school that could be deployed flexibly in teaching pupils/students with SEN.

The new allocation model differs substantially from the previous model. Under this new model, the Department provides resources directly to primary and post-primary schools based on their educational profiles,[8] and enables schools to allocate those resources flexibly to pupils/students according to their priority learning needs, without the requirement for a diagnosis, a professional report or disability labelling.

A key principle underpinning this revised model is that all children and young people, irrespective of SEN, are welcomed and enabled to enrol in their local schools. Meaningful inclusion implies that all pupils/students are taught in stimulating and supportive classroom environments where they are respected and valued, and where their individual needs are addressed. In addition to principles underpinning the deployment of resources, the Department's *Guidelines for Supporting Pupils/Students with Special Educational Needs in Mainstream Schools* provide additional guidance on identifying, responding to and monitoring outcomes for children and young people with SEN.

There were difficulties in the early stages of implementing the special education teacher allocation model

Whole-school evaluation (WSE) inspection findings at primary and post-primary level during the period between September 2017 and November 2018 are reflective of schools' earliest experiences of deploying their resources in line with the special education teacher (SET) model. These indicate that school leaders, on the whole, made good decisions that were informed by the principles of the model, and that they were working to make their schools as inclusive as possible. The findings also indicate that the quality of teaching of pupils with SEN was good and that there was greater emphasis on the provision of in-class support.

---

8   Further details as to how schools' educational profiles are constructed are available in primary circular 0013/2017 and post-primary circular 0014/2017. The circulars are available at https://www.gov.ie/en/circular/2b623033fe52468fb03d250e3cd12a04/ and https://www.gov.ie/en/circular/b1ee7005c95747cea9e6406b8a5b3c67/ respectively.

However, inspectors identified scope for development in some aspects of leadership, and teachers' collaborative practice. These included the need to ensure that strategies implemented in schools were aligned fully with addressing the pupils'/students' identified priority learning needs. One aspect of provision required particular attention; in a minority of primary and post-primary schools, additional teaching resources provided for the purposes of assisting the school in meeting the special educational needs of some children were not being fully deployed for these purposes in accordance with the terms of *Circular 0013/2017* (Primary) or *Circular 0014/2017* (Post-primary). There were 283 WSE inspections conducted to the end of November 2018, following the issuing of these circulars. Arising from these inspections, thirty-three memorandums relating to the inappropriate deployment of the additional SEN teaching resources were submitted by inspectors to the Special Education Section of the Department. Following engagement between officials in Special Education Section and the schools regarding the substantive issues raised in the memorandums, most of the issues relating to non-compliance were resolved.

6.2.3 INSPECTION OF SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS PROVISION

A specific inspection model to evaluate special educational needs provision in post-primary schools was initiated

While the Inspectorate reports on the quality of provision for children and young people with SEN through a range of evaluation models, an additional specific evaluation model was introduced in 2016 to evaluate SEN provision in mainstream primary schools. This inspection model pays particular attention to the school's use of the *Continuum of Support* and its adherence to the principles and actions outlined in *Guidelines for Primary Schools Supporting Pupils with Special Educational Needs in Mainstream Schools* (See Chapter 2). This was followed in 2019 by the introduction of a similarly-focused evaluation model for post-primary schools. The quality of provision in special classes is also evaluated as part of the curriculum evaluation model in primary schools and, where relevant, as part of the subject inspection model at post-primary level.

Findings from special educational needs-focused inspections show that teaching and learning were good or very good in almost all lessons in primary schools. The quality of teaching and learning varied in post-primary schools

Over the September 2016 to December 2020 period, the quality of teaching and the quality of learning were found to be good or very good overall in 96% of SEN-focused inspections in primary schools (Table 6.4). Parent survey data from these inspections indicate that 93% of parents were satisfied with the opportunities that they had to discuss their child's learning.

At post-primary level, SEN-focused inspections commenced in March 2019. The number of SEN-focused inspections at post-primary level conducted since their introduction in 2019 was relatively small, mainly because of school closures related to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. The quality of teaching was good or very good in 78% of these inspections and satisfactory in the remaining 22% (Table 6.4). The quality of learning was good or very good in 63% of these inspections and satisfactory in the remaining 37%. While these findings come from a relatively small number of SEN-focused inspections at post-primary level, they indicate that there is scope for the improvement of provision for children with SEN at this level. Parent survey data from these inspections indicates that 19% of parents were dissatisfied with the opportunities available to them to discuss their child's learning. The difference in these findings between primary and post-primary is notable.

Table 6.4: Quality of teaching and learning in SEN-focused inspections in primary schools, September 2016 - December 2020, and post-primary schools, March 2019 - December 2020

	Primary		Post-primary	
	Teaching	Learning	Teaching	Learning
Very good	36.9%	32.1%	3.7%	3.7%
Good	58.3%	64.3%	74.1%	59.3%
Satisfactory	3.6%	2.4%	22.2%	37.0%
Fair	1.2%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Weak	0.0%	1.2%	0.0%	0.0%

Source: Inspectorate, Department of Education

Inspection findings are positive in relation to pupils'/students' engagement in special classes and support settings in mainstream schools and special schools

Pupils' enjoyment and motivation were noted to be good or very good in 86% of lessons observed in special classes and support settings in curriculum evaluations, SEN inspections, and whole-school type inspections in primary schools and special schools (Table 6.5). The corresponding figure for subject inspections, SEN inspections, programme evaluations and whole-school evaluations in post-primary schools was 79%. In announced inspections at primary level, pupils' engagement in learning was noted to be good or very good in 89% of lessons observed in these SEN settings. At post-primary level, the corresponding figure was 84%. Pupil/student enjoyment and motivation was satisfactory in 12% and 18% of these lessons at primary and post-primary level respectively. It is notable that the quality of pupils' and students' experience in terms of enjoyment and motivation, and engagement in learning was judged to be fair or weak in a very small number of contexts, ranging from 2.3% to 3.6% as shown in Table 6.5 below.

Table 6.5: Children and young people's engagement, enjoyment and motivation in special classes and support settings in primary schools, special classes in post-primary schools, and special schools: September 2016 - December 2020

	Enjoyment and motivation		Engagement in learning	
	Primary schools and special schools	Post-primary	Primary schools and special schools	Post-primary
Very good	45.8%	52.9%	46.4%	51.8%
Good	40.1%	25.9%	42.1%	31.8%
Satisfactory	11.5%	17.6%	9.2%	14.1%
Fair	2.2%	2.4%	2.0%	2.3%
Weak	0.4%	1.2%	0.3%	0.0%

Source: Inspectorate, Department of Education

Use of assessment to support learning and in-class support for learning are areas for improvement

Assessment practices and the provision of in-class support for learning needs were found to be in need of improvement in special classes and support settings in primary schools, and in special schools and in special classes in post-primary schools. The use of assessment to identify pupils'/students' needs and to plan systematically for the next steps in their learning is an important aspect of good provision for all learners, but particularly so for learners who have special educational needs. The use of assessment to support learning was good or very good in just 62% of lessons observed in special classes and support settings in primary schools and special schools, and in 72% of lessons observed in special classes in post-primary schools (Table 6.6). Inspectors found that the use of assessment to support learning was fair or weak in 11% of primary schools and special schools, and in 5.9% of post-primary schools. Provision of in-class support was either fair or weak in 4.9% of lessons observed in primary schools and special schools, and 8.2% in post-primary schools (Table 6.6).

Table 6.6: The use of assessment and in-class support in special classes and support settings in primary schools, in special schools and in special classes in post-primary schools: September 2016 - December 2020

	The use of assessment to support learning		In-class support for learning needs	
	Primary schools and special schools	Post-primary	Primary schools and special schools	Post-primary
Very good	24.4%	44.7%	37.8%	60.0%
Good	37.3%	27.1%	38.3%	15.3%
Satisfactory	27.2%	22.3%	19.1%	16.5%
Fair	9.2%	4.7%	4.2%	8.2%
Weak	1.9%	1.2%	0.7%	0.0%

Source: Inspectorate, Department of Education

6.2.4 LEARNER PLACEMENT

The placement of learners in special classes for children and young people with autism requires regular review; the allocation of highly skilled and experienced teachers to these classes should be prioritised by schools

As noted earlier, the number of special classes for children and young people with autism has risen rapidly over recent years. As increasing numbers of pupils transfer from special classes in primary schools to post-primary school, there has been considerable growth in the demand to open new post-primary special classes. In early 2019, the Inspectorate conducted a series of SEN evaluations in mainstream primary schools and post-primary schools that had special classes for learners with autism. The evaluations were carried out at the request of the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) to provide current, school-based information to support the policy advice function of the NCSE. Inspectors used the SEN evaluation model to collect evidence from sixty-five special classes in primary schools and twenty special classes in post-primary schools. The findings of these evaluations of special classes for learners with autism were published in a composite report in May 2020.[9] The relatively recent development of special classes at second level must be understood as a contextual factor when comparing practices between the primary and post-primary sectors.

9   *Department of Education (2020) Education Provision for Learners with Autism Spectrum Disorder in Special Classes Attached to Mainstream Schools in Ireland. Available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/c466e-education-provision-for-learners-with-autism-spectrum-disorder-in-special-classes-attached-to-mainstream-schools-in-ireland/*

The findings indicated that, in some schools and more particularly at post-primary level, restrictive clauses in enrolment policies resulted in some pupils/students with less complex needs being enrolled in special classes when they were capable of greater integration within mainstream classes. As a result, these learners spent most of their time integrated with their peers on a partial basis, but did not achieve full mainstream enrolment. Meanwhile, other pupils/students with more complex autism needs and co-occurring learning needs[10] encountered difficulties enrolling in the special classes within these schools. Moreover, some of the parents of these children and young people were, reportedly, directed towards home-tuition or special schools. It is important, therefore, that there is clarity in relation to enrolment policies for special classes to ensure that the allocation of places in special classes is consistent, and that the allocation of children with complex needs to these classes is prioritised. In turn, this will help to avoid an unnecessary demand for places in special schools.

Arising from these findings, inspectors advised that enrolment policies for classes for pupils/students with autism should prioritise places for those with complex needs, and that pupils/students with less complex needs be included in mainstream classes with appropriate support. In addition, inspectors advised that all learners' placements in special classes should be reviewed formally on an annual basis and that school leaders should allocate appropriately skilled and experienced teachers to the special classes.

The current system of special classes for children and young people with autism appears to be having limited success in the promotion of their full inclusion

The Inspectorate report on education provision in special classes[11] for children and young people with autism suggests that, in the context of Ireland's ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN CRPD), and the possible implications of Section 24 (Part 2) in particular, policy makers should examine whether the current configuration of special classes is the most effective model to include all children and young people fully in school life. Specifically, if full inclusion or enrolment into mainstream classes is to be viewed as the ultimate aim, the current system of special classes appears to be having limited success for many learners who enrol in a special class. While the system of establishing special classes is intended to support learners with different needs on a journey towards full inclusion, there is a risk that these children and young people will be seen as being separate from their mainstream peers, and that partial inclusion may be perceived incorrectly as a successful outcome for the learner. Our education system must strive to achieve full inclusion for all.

There are also increasing demands being made for the establishment of new special classes for learners with autism as distinct from other types of special classes. This, together with the reported reluctance of some school authorities to open these special classes, means that there is a strong risk that segregated educational provision will be expanded unintentionally.

---

10 *Such learning needs may relate to sensory issues, communication needs, self-regulation difficulties and a requirement for structure and predictability in the learning environment.*

11 *Department of Education (2020) Education Provision for Learners with Autism Spectrum Disorder in Special Classes Attached to Mainstream Schools in Ireland. Available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/c466e-education-provision-for-learners-with-autism-spectrum-disorder-in-special-classes-attached-to-mainstream-schools-in-ireland/*

6.3. SOCIAL INCLUSION

6.3.1 POLICY AND STRATEGY

Social inclusion remains a key priority for the Department

Social inclusion is a key priority for the Department of Education. In this regard, the Social Inclusion Unit (SIU), a unit within the broader Department, is responsible for developing and promoting a co-ordinated approach to tackling educational disadvantage from pre-school through to post-primary education.

The Inspectorate works closely with SIU on all matters relating to Social Inclusion, in particular in relation to the implementation of Delivering Equality of Opportunity In Schools (DEIS). The Inspectorate participates in a number of working groups established by the SIU to progress policy in the area of educational disadvantage. These include the DEIS Monitoring and Evaluation Committee, which is chaired by the Principal Officer in the SIU and the Department's DEIS steering group. Through this close collaboration with SIU, practices in DEIS schools are highlighted by the Inspectorate, thus contributing to the Department's policy on social inclusion.

The remainder of this section explores some of the key developments in the area of social inclusion over the period to which this report refers.

The DEIS plan 2017 set out an ambitious range of objectives and actions to support children and young people at greatest risk of educational disadvantage

The _DEIS Plan 2017_ replaced the _DEIS Action Plan for Educational Inclusion_ (2005). The plan aims to promote better educational outcomes for pupils/students from the most disadvantaged communities and to maximise the chances of every child and young person getting the best possible opportunity to fulfil their educational potential. It sets out the vision for future intervention in the critical area of social inclusion in education policy and remains the Department's policy instrument to address educational disadvantage.

Schools are expected to develop an action plan for improvement encompassing the following areas or themes: attendance, retention[12], transitions[13], literacy, numeracy, examination attainment (post-primary only), and partnership with parents, schools, educational providers and external agencies, all of which had been included in the 2005 action plan. Additional themes relating to wellbeing, continuing professional development (CPD) and leadership were introduced in the DEIS Plan 2017. Schools were required to revise their existing DEIS plans to incorporate actions relating to these new themes.

In the planning process, schools are expected to agree targets under each of the DEIS themes, that will inform teachers' individual and collaborative planning for teaching and learning.

While the principal of each school has overall responsibility for leading the process of action planning for improvement, the co-ordination of planning for individual themes is delegated frequently to individual teachers or staff teams.

---

12 The target in relation to retention in DEIS Plan 2017 is to continue to improve retention rates at second-level in DEIS schools from their current rate of 82.7% to the national norm, currently 90.2%, by 2025.

13 There are a number of key transitions for children and young people as they move across the education continuum:
- From home to pre-school setting
- From pre-school to the junior year of primary school
- From junior to senior classes at primary level
- From primary school to post-primary school
- From Junior to Senior Cycle within post-primary school
- From post-primary school to further and higher education and the world of work

6.3.2   NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH

Findings from research suggest that the DEIS programme is having a positive impact on achievement in DEIS primary and post-primary schools

Since 2007, the Educational Research Centre (ERC), has been undertaking, on behalf of the Department, an ongoing independent evaluation of the School Support Programme (SSP) component of DEIS in primary and post-primary schools. The School Support Programme brought together, and builds upon, existing interventions for schools and school clusters/communities with a concentrated level of educational disadvantage. The evaluation has been monitoring implementation of the programme and assessing its impact on participants.

A report [14], published by the ERC in 2017, described the results of testing in reading and Mathematics among 17,000 second, third, fifth and sixth class pupils in 118 urban DEIS primary schools in 2016. The findings indicated that achievement in reading and Mathematics had continued to improve in DEIS primary schools, and that this had been accompanied by increased positivity among pupils towards school and education. However, the report cautioned that, in the absence of a control group, the degree to which growth in achievement since 2007 could be directly attributed to participation in DEIS was unclear. It also noted that interpretation of the gains in urban DEIS primary schools was complicated by the finding in the most recent national assessments of achievement in reading and Mathematics [15] that standards had increased among second and sixth class pupils nationally between 2009 and 2014.

In January 2019, the ERC published a report on DEIS schools[16] that examined trends in achievement and attainment over time in DEIS and non-DEIS post-primary schools. Student attainment was defined in terms of Junior and Senior Cycle retention rates, and student achievement in terms of performance in the Junior Certificate Examination. While positive trends in achievement and attainment were identified in both DEIS and non-DEIS schools since 2002, there was evidence that improvements were more marked in DEIS than in non-DEIS schools. It is also encouraging to note from the findings that, since the introduction of DEIS in the 2006/2007 school year, there had been reductions in the proportion of students in DEIS schools sitting foundation level papers in English and Mathematics, and increases in the proportion sitting higher level papers in these subjects. For example, in 2007, approximately one-quarter (24%) of students in DEIS schools who sat the Junior Certificate Mathematics examination took a foundation level paper. By 2016, this had reduced to 13%. Furthermore, the proportion of DEIS students taking the higher level Mathematics paper increased from 19% in 2007 to 33% in 2016. The corresponding change in non-DEIS schools was from 48% in 2007 to 61% in 2016. The findings suggest the improvements in DEIS schools may be associated with participation in the programme.

In the Programme for International Student Assessment 2018, the average score of students in DEIS post-primary schools was on par with the OECD average in reading; in Mathematics and Science it was below the OECD average, but the percentage of low achievers in Mathematics had reduced.

The *Programme for International Student Assessment* (PISA) measures the outcomes of education achieved by the age of fifteen. The findings offer the opportunity to compare the achievements of students in DEIS post-primary schools with those in non-DEIS post-primary schools. In 2020, the ERC published a report[17] that detailed the reading, mathematics and science achievement of students in DEIS and non-DEIS post-primary schools.

Findings from PISA 2018 show that while the average reading score in DEIS post-primary schools was at the Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) average, and the difference in average reading achievement between DEIS and non-DEIS post-primary schools was lower in 2018 than in 2009, there remains a high percentage of students in DEIS post-primary schools with low reading

14 Kavanagh, E., Weir, S. and Moran, E. (2017) *The Evaluation of DEIS: Monitoring Achievement and Attitudes among Urban Primary School Pupils from 2007 to 2016.* Available at: https://www.erc.ie/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/DEIS-report-2017.pdf

15 Shiel, G., Kavanagh, L. and Millar, D. (2015) *The 2014 National Assessments of English Reading and Mathematics.* Available at: https://www.erc.ie/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/NA_2014_Vol1_Final-updated.pdf

16 Weir, S. and Kavanagh, L. (2019) *The evaluation of DEIS at post-primary level: Closing the achievement and attainment gaps.* Available at: http://www.erc.ie/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Weir-Kavanagh-2018-DEIS-post-primary.pdf

17 Gilleece L., Nelis, S.M., Fitzgerald, C. and Cosgrove, J. (2020) *Reading, Mathematics and Science Achievement in DEIS schools: Evidence from PISA 2018.*
Available at: https://www.erc.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/ERC-DEIS-Report_Sept-2020_A4_Website.pdf

achievement. Of particular concern in this regard is the finding of lower levels of reading enjoyment and 'reading self-concept[18] amongst students in DEIS post-primary schools than in non-DEIS post-primary schools, given the relationship between student engagement with reading and positive attitudes towards reading, and overall reading achievement.

In PISA 2018, students in DEIS post-primary schools scored below the OECD average in Mathematics and Science. Average scores in Mathematics and Science of students in DEIS post-primary schools were also significantly below those of students in non-DEIS post-primary schools with a difference of 43.8 and 41 score points respectively in favour of non-DEIS post-primary schools. However, there was a substantial reduction in the percentage of students in DEIS post-primary schools at the lowest levels of mathematics achievement; in 2012, 37% of students in DEIS post-primary schools were low achievers and by 2018, this had reduced to 28%. A small percentage (3.6%) of students in DEIS post-primary schools reached the highest levels of achievement in Mathematics; the corresponding percentage in non-DEIS post-primary schools was 9.7%.

Students in DEIS post-primary schools also scored below the OECD average in Science in 2018. Their average science performance was significantly lower than the average of students in non-DEIS post-primary schools. The percentage of low achieving students in Science was higher in DEIS post-primary schools (28.2%) compared to non-DEIS post-primary schools (13.5%). A small percentage (3.1%) of students in DEIS post-primary schools reached the highest levels of achievement in Science; the corresponding percentage in non-DEIS post-primary schools was 6.7%.

The report cautions that it is important to situate the achievement gaps identified within the broader context of the challenges faced by students, teachers and the wider school community in DEIS schools. The report advises that understanding the particular challenges faced by students in DEIS schools may help in tailoring interventions so that maximum benefit can be derived from supports provided under DEIS.

6.3.3 ATTENDANCE AND RETENTION

There has been little progress in increasing retention rates in DEIS post-primary schools

One of the key targets in DEIS 2017 is to continue to improve retention rates in post-primary DEIS schools, from their current rate of 82.7% to the national norm, currently 90.2%, by 2025. Over the period to which this report refers, there has been little progress in this regard; in 2016, the retention rate in DEIS post-primary schools was 84.4% and in 2020 it was 84.8% (Table 6.7). During the period 2016-2019, the gap in retention to Leaving Certificate between DEIS and non-DEIS schools increased from 8.5% to 9.3% (Table 6.7) but returned closer to 2016-2018 levels in 2020.

Table 6.7: Retention Rates in DEIS post-primary schools: 2016-2020

Indicator	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Retention rate in DEIS post-primary schools (%) LC completion	84.4%	85.0%	84.7%	83.8%	84.8%
Gap in retention rates: DEIS vs non-DEIS post-primary schools	8.5%	8.5%	8.7%	9.3%	8.6%

Source: Statistics Section, Department of Education

18 *Reading self-concept includes students' perceptions of both their own competence in reading and whether they encountered difficulties in learning how to read.*

School attendance rates in DEIS primary and post-primary schools remain a concern

The Department has ongoing engagement with the Tusla Education Support Service (TESS) in relation to the promotion of school attendance, participation and retention among primary pupils and post-primary students. TESS comprises three strands: the statutory Educational Welfare Service (EWS) and the two school support services: the Home School Community Liaison Scheme (HSCL) and the School Completion Programme (SCP).

The analysis of school attendance by Tusla raises concern in relation to DEIS schools. The most recent report[19] , which is based on 2017/18 data, found that non-attendance, twenty-day absences, expulsions and suspensions were highest among DEIS Band 1 schools (when compared to DEIS Band 2 schools, non-DEIS urban schools, DEIS rural schools and non-DEIS rural schools). DEIS Band 2 schools generally had the second highest rates on these measures. In relation to post-primary schools, the report found that non-attendance, twenty-day absences, expulsions and suspensions were significantly and substantially higher among DEIS post-primary schools compared with non-DEIS post-primary schools.

6.3.4 INSPECTION OF DEIS SETTINGS AND SCHOOLS

There has been a very considerable increase in the number of DEIS evaluations by the Inspectorate

The Inspectorate's DEIS evaluation model provides for evaluation and reporting on the quality of the school's action planning for improvement. In DEIS evaluations, the planning process and the implementation of improvement strategies for each of the themes are evaluated separately.

During the period to which this report refers, the Inspectorate carried out 98 evaluations of DEIS action planning for improvement. Of these evaluations, 50 were conducted at primary level and 48 at post-primary level. This represents a significant increase on the 38 DEIS evaluations undertaken during the 2013 to April 2016 period of the last _Chief Inspector's Report_ (2016).

Innovative cross-sectoral approaches have been implemented during some evaluations of DEIS settings and schools

The Inspectorate has adopted innovative approaches to inspection during the course of some DEIS evaluations which have been conducted on a cross-sectoral basis. During these evaluations, primary inspectors joined post-primary inspection teams, and post-primary inspectors joined primary inspection teams. This work provides an opportunity for inspectors to gain an understanding of, and to comment on the coherence of the education pathway for children and young people as they progress from primary to post-primary schools. In addition, early years inspectors collaborated with primary colleagues in an informal trial, in which they used the EYEI quality framework during DEIS evaluations in primary schools.

Findings from DEIS evaluations are positive in relation to planning and implementation of strategies relating to retention and partnership with parents. Action planning in relation to attendance, transitions and examination attainment requires improvement, particularly in post-primary schools

Inspectors found that planning and the implementation of strategies related to retention and partnership with parents and others were good or very good in 86% to 90% of DEIS schools (Table 6.8). While schools' planning and implementation of strategies in relation to retention was good or very good in 86% and 89% of schools respectively, it is concerning that this was not reflected to the same degree in retention outcomes as outlined earlier in this chapter (Table 6.7). Planning and implementation of strategies related to transition were found to be good or very good in 80% of schools, but it is notable that they were just satisfactory or less than satisfactory in almost a fifth of schools (Table 6.9).

The planning and implementation of attendance strategies were found to be of a good or very good quality respectively in 76% and 69% of schools inspected (Table 6.9). Planning in this area was found to be satisfactory or less than satisfactory in almost a quarter of the schools inspected. The implementation

19 Denner, S. and Cosgrove, J. (2020) School Attendance Data Primary and Post-Primary Schools And Student Absence Reports Primary
    and Post-Primary Schools 2017/18. Available at:
    https://www.tusla.ie/uploads/content/Analysis_of_School_Attendance_Data_in_Primary_and_Post-Primary_Schools_2017-2018.pdf

of related strategies was found to be satisfactory or less than satisfactory in 31% of schools (Table 6.9). In addition, data from surveys administered as part of inspections indicates that 19% of students at post-primary level felt that they had missed a lot of school days in the previous year. The corresponding figure for primary schools was 8%. It is evident that an enhanced focus on attendance is necessary at both levels to ensure that pupils/students are not missing out on key learning, and are availing of the supports available to them in their school.

In their responses to the Inspectorate survey administered during DEIS evaluations, a very high proportion (90%) of students in DEIS post-primary schools indicated their intention to sit their Leaving Certificate. However, inspection data from these schools indicates that that there is much scope to improve planning and the implementation of strategies relating to examination attainment in DEIS schools. Planning in this area was found to be good or very good in just 52% of the schools evaluated (Table 6.10). The implementation of related strategies was found to be good or very good in just 58% of schools. It should be noted that schools have a significant amount of information and data available that can support effective target-setting practices.

Table 6.8: Quality of planning and implementation for Retention and Partnership themes in DEIS evaluations in primary and post-primary schools: September 2016 - December 2020

	Retention		Partnership with parents and others	
	Planning	**Implementation**	**Planning**	**Implementation**
Very good	54.1%	56.1%	59.2%	59.2%
Good	31.6%	32.7%	28.6%	30.6%
Satisfactory	7.1%	7.1%	8.2%	6.1%
Fair	4.1%	3.1%	2.0%	3.1%
Weak	3.1%	1.0%	2.0%	1.0%

Source: Inspectorate, Department of Education

Table 6.9: Quality of planning and implementation for Transitions and Attendance themes in DEIS evaluations in primary and post-primary schools: September 2016 - December 2020

	Transitions		Attendance	
	Planning	**Implementation**	**Planning**	**Implementation**
Very good	53.1%	55.1%	39.8%	39.8%
Good	27.6%	26.5%	35.7%	29.6%
Satisfactory	10.2%	15.3%	17.4%	23.5%
Fair	7.1%	3.1%	5.1%	6.1%
Weak	2.0%	0.0%	2.0%	1.0%

Source: Inspectorate, Department of Education

	Examination Attainment	
	Planning	Implementation
Very good	22.9%	20.8%
Good	29.2%	37.5%
Satisfactory	29.2%	22.9%
Fair	12.5%	14.6%
Weak	6.2%	4.2%

Source: Inspectorate, Department of Education

The leadership of the action planning process requires improvement in a significant minority of DEIS schools

In DEIS schools, as in all schools, effective leadership is a key component in setting improvement targets and in planning, implementing and monitoring the impact of improvement strategies. The overall quality of leadership of the action planning for improvement process was found to be good or very good in 69% of the primary and post-primary schools where DEIS evaluations were carried out in the September 2016 to December 2020 period. Given the importance of effective leadership, particularly in DEIS schools, it is of concern that the quality of leadership of the action planning process in DEIS schools was just satisfactory or less than satisfactory in almost a third (31%) of the schools inspected.

Planning and implementation of strategies for literacy and numeracy are positive overall. Aspects of numeracy require attention, particularly learners' enjoyment of Mathematics

Across all DEIS evaluations, both planning and implementation of literacy strategies were found to be good or very good in 76% of schools (Table 6.11). While the corresponding figures for numeracy were broadly similar (74% for planning and 72% for implementation), it is notable that the number of schools in the very good category for numeracy was less than the figure for literacy.

Table 6.11: Quality of planning and implementation for Literacy and Numeracy themes in DEIS evaluations in primary and post-primary schools: September 2016 - December 2020

	Literacy		Numeracy	
	Planning	Implementation	Planning	Implementation
Very good	30.6%	31.6%	24.5%	25.5%
Good	44.9%	44.0%	49.0%	46.9%
Satisfactory	15.3%	16.3%	16.3%	17.4%
Fair	8.2%	7.1%	8.2%	6.1%
Weak	1.0%	1.0%	2.0%	4.1%

Source: Inspectorate, Department of Education

Survey data from post-primary DEIS schools indicates a notable decline in learners' enjoyment of Mathematics between primary and post-primary. Seventy-four per cent of students in post-primary DEIS schools reported that they liked English while only 51% reported that they liked Mathematics. At primary level, 79% of pupils in DEIS schools reported that they liked English while 69% liked Mathematics. Given these findings, DEIS schools should endeavour to ensure that mathematical learning experiences are relevant and engaging for all learners.

Survey data also indicates that, while pupils in primary DEIS schools tend to prefer English to Mathematics, they feel that they are doing better in Mathematics than in reading. Seventy-one per cent of pupils indicated that they were doing well in Mathematics while 67% reported that they were doing well in reading. In primary non-DEIS schools, a broadly similar proportion of pupils (75%) reported that they were doing well in Mathematics, but a considerably greater percentage (79%) reported that they were doing well in reading. These findings indicate that DEIS primary schools should enable and encourage pupils to read a broad range of material for pleasure, at reading levels that promote their confidence and enthusiasm.

Another finding from pupil/student surveys is that there is a considerable decline in enthusiasm for learning between primary and post-primary for pupils/students attending DEIS schools. Only 50% of students in DEIS schools at post-primary level reported that they like coming to school while the corresponding figure for pupils in DEIS schools at primary level is 68%. This indicates that broader cross-curricular efforts to make learning relevant and engaging are necessary at post-primary level.

Findings from curriculum evaluations in English and Mathematics indicate that supports provided to DEIS primary schools are having a positive impact on both the quality of teaching and the quality of assessment, but are having less impact on the quality of learning

The findings from curriculum evaluations conducted in primary schools, over the period to which this report refers, reflect positively on the quality of teaching and of assessment in English in DEIS primary schools. While the percentage of schools in which the quality of teaching in English was good or very good was broadly similar in both DEIS (94%) and non-DEIS primary schools (91%), the quality of teaching was rated as very good in 38% of DEIS primary schools in comparison with 23% of non-DEIS primary schools.

In curriculum evaluations of Mathematics, the quality of teaching was found to be good or very good in well over 90% of both DEIS and non-DEIS primary schools. It was rated as good or very good in 94% of DEIS schools evaluated and in 98% of non-DEIS schools. The percentage of schools in which the quality of teaching was rated as very good was broadly similar in both DEIS (42%) and non-DEIS schools (40%).

In English, the findings indicate that the overall quality of assessment was good or very good in 72% of DEIS primary schools in comparison with 63% of non-DEIS primary schools. In Mathematics, the overall quality of assessment was good or very good in 76% of DEIS schools compared with 70% of non-DEIS schools.

Despite the positive findings in DEIS schools in relation to the quality of teaching and assessment, it appears that these are taking time to impact as positively on the quality of pupils' learning. In English, the quality of learning was found to be good or very good in 81% of DEIS schools and in 91% of non-DEIS schools. Similarly, in Mathematics, the quality of learning was found to be good or very good in 88% of DEIS schools and in 97% of non-DEIS schools.

6.3.5 SUPPORT TEACHERS

Overall, support teachers were effective in enhancing educational opportunities for learners with behavioural difficulties, but they need to monitor learners' progress and achievements systematically

In late 2019, a series of SEN evaluations was conducted in a sample of forty DEIS primary schools that benefit from participation in the Support Teacher Project. In schools involved with this project, support

teachers are appointed to work to support individual learners or small groups of learners to manage their behaviours. The report containing collated findings from these evaluations was published in 2020. [20]

Inspectors noted that, overall, support teachers were effective in enhancing the educational opportunities of the target group of pupils and also succeeded in enhancing the educational opportunities of all pupils. In almost all schools, there was a general awareness of the specific role and responsibilities of the support teacher. Of the schools evaluated, 70% had a plan in place for the deployment of the support teacher. Most, but not all, schools had a clear rationale for the inclusion of learners in the support teacher's target group. However, the learning outcomes of pupils in the target group were tracked systematically in only half of the schools evaluated. Commendably, most support teachers used the Continuum of Support to prepare a plan for pupils. In some schools, the targets in learning plans were overly general in nature. The inspection findings demonstrate a clear need for support teachers to track and monitor learners' progress and achievements systematically.

Inspections highlight the need to define the roles and responsibilities of support teachers clearly

It was evident from the evaluation of the Support Teacher Project that the roles and responsibilities of the support teacher needed to be clearly outlined in the school plan to ensure more effective use of the support for learners. Arising from the inspections, all schools were advised to devise a plan regarding the deployment of the support teacher to optimise the use of this resource in schools. Inspectors further advised the schools to develop clear guidelines to support collaboration between the support teacher and other teachers in the school. The inspections generally found that there was a need for schools to provide a clear rationale for the inclusion of pupils in the target group. One of the main overarching findings of these inspections was the need to provide an induction programme and ongoing continuing professional development (CPD) opportunities for newly-appointed support teachers.

6.3.6 THE SCHOOL EXCELLENCE FUND

The School Excellence Fund encourages the use of innovative approaches to tackling educational disadvantage

The School Excellence Fund (SEF) was established in 2017 to enable early learning and care (ELC) settings, schools and other education settings to participate in innovative programmes that take account of the particular context of each school or setting, that are aimed at improving learning outcomes for children and young people. Projects associated with the SEF established during the period to which this report refers include:

- SEF-DEIS
- SEF-Digital
- SEF-STEM
- SEF-Creative Clusters
- SEF-Step Up

The programme was designed to ensure that innovative approaches and proposals to tackle educational disadvantage were supported and recognised. Schools in the SEF-DEIS were challenged to promote innovation by adopting new evidence-based approaches to tackling underperformance in a range of areas such as literacy, STEM or the Arts.

During the period to which this report refers, thirty cross-sectoral clusters, comprising sixty primary schools, twenty-four post-primary schools, and fifteen early years settings, participated in the initiative.

---

20 Inspectorate (2020) *Evaluation of the Support Teacher Project. Available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/5b4f1-evaluation-of-the-support-teacher-project/*

Innovative approaches adopted by schools in the SEF-DEIS programme included:

- the development of computational thinking skills through creative use of the outdoor environment and through engagements with Lego and robotics

- collaboration between early learning settings, schools and a university department of speech and language sciences to address early language acquisition and development through play-based teaching

- targeting high achievers and talented pupils through the development of the STEM subjects

- the development of higher-order language skills amongst English as an Additional Language (EAL) students

- the promotion of wellbeing through nurture and the development of Growth Mindsets

- the development of pupils' scientific skill development and expertise using a local marine habitat

- using an aquaponics system of growing food to enhance teaching and learning

An initial evaluation of a cross-section of clusters in the initiative by the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) in Northern Ireland in 2019 found key gains arose from the initiative in the area of leadership and learning. These included the development of effective communication, coordination and collaboration between cluster schools to the benefit of both teachers and learners, and wider involvement of external partners and engagement with parents. The findings also indicated that the link inspectors played a significant role in giving momentum to and/or providing challenge to the clusters as appropriate.

The findings indicated that there was a wide range of gains for learners including improved behaviour, enhanced personal capabilities, increased enjoyment, development of their thinking skills, and noteworthy improvements in learning outcomes and in learning experiences. Benefits to teachers included professional development in their subject knowledge and pedagogic approaches. The findings also indicated that developing approaches to assessment, tailored to the specific purposes of each cluster, had the potential to inform self-evaluation leading to further improvement.

There are plans in place for schools in the SEF-DEIS clusters to conduct a rigorous system of internal self-evaluation of the initiatives. This will be complemented by ongoing external evaluation by inspectors from the ETI in Northern Ireland with a view to ensuring that the learning from the initiative informs policy and practice at local and national level.

6.3.7 NATIONAL TRAVELLER AND ROMA INCLUSION STRATEGY

The Inspectorate contributed to the work of the National Traveller Roma Inclusion Strategy

The *National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy 2017-2021*, which was launched in June 2017, is a whole of government strategy aimed at improving the lives of the Traveller and Roma communities in Ireland. As part of the strategy, all relevant Departments and agencies are to promote access to the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme for every child within the Traveller and Roma communities, including children with a disability. In addition, good practice initiatives to support parental engagement and children's participation in education are to be implemented.

The Inspectorate contributed to the work of National Traveller Roma Inclusion Strategy (NTRIS) through participation on a number of steering groups at both local and national levels. Inspectors provided advisory support to clusters of primary and post-primary schools across four sites, and engaged with them in the development of their self-evaluation process to achieve improved learning outcomes for Traveller and Roma students. The Inspectorate also has engaged with Traveller groups and has arranged for their involvement in the development of inspection models. A detailed examination of educational provision for Travellers will be a focus of the Inspectorate's work in the 2022-2025 period.

6.4. MITIGATING THE IMPACT OF COVID-19

As outlined in Chapter 1, and expanded upon further in Chapter 10, extensive and wide-ranging actions were undertaken by the Department of Education, as well as other Departments and support agencies, to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on pupils and students in schools, particularly those with special educational needs and those at risk of disadvantage. These measures included a substantial package of additional funding for schools, the provision of a range of supports and resources for digital learning and for pupil/student wellbeing and the publication of guidance documents to assist schools in ensuring that there was continuity of learning for all pupils and students. The Department also put additional summer programmes in place, primarily to support pupils and students with special educational needs and those most at risk of educational disadvantage.

To help mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on learners with special educational needs and on those at most risk of educational disadvantage, the Department developed summer programmes

Teaching and learning were disrupted for all children and young people during the school closures related to COVID-19 in 2020. However, the findings of Inspectorate research conducted during the periods of school closures indicated that remote teaching impacted particularly negatively on many children and young people with SEN, and also on those from disadvantaged backgrounds, both from a learning and wellbeing perspective. To address this challenges, the Department developed a new Summer Provision programme in 2020, which facilitated the provision of educational supports during the summer to a range of pupils with SEN. This programme was an expansion of the previous July Provision programme. The Department also offered a Summer Programme to all DEIS primary and post-primary schools. This programme focused on encouraging those students deemed most in need to reconnect with school. It aimed to support their physical, social and emotional wellbeing and providing them with the skills they need to engage in a meaningful way with learning in the future.[21]

At primary level and in special schools, the Department offered a school-based summer programme and a home-based summer programme for a range of children with SEN

The absence of school, in conjunction with the withdrawal of most other community supports, proved to be particularly challenging for many children with SEN. The Department offered a school-based summer programme for a range of children with SEN, and where this was not available locally for children, parents could choose a home-based summer programme instead. The Inspectorate collaborated with the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) and with representatives of the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) and Special Education Section to devise guidance to assist schools with the content, approaches and the operation of the summer programme.

Overall, the programme was designed to help pupils to:

- reconnect with their schools, their teachers and their peers
- enhance their readiness for learning and ultimately reduce regression in learning
- develop resilience and nurture wellbeing by promoting a sense of safety, calm, connectedness, self-efficacy, and hope
- develop skills and routines to ensure they successfully transition into the next stage of their schooling.

---

21 Further information on the Summer Programme provided by the Department in 2020 is available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/cab14-government-announces-new-summer-provision-2020/

The Inspectorate review of the Summer Provision programme at primary level and in special schools identified many benefits to pupils. However, the lack of availability of transport was identified as a concern

The Inspectorate reviewed the operation of the 2020 summer provision programme. The findings indicated there were many benefits for the pupils who engaged in the programme. There were strong positive responses from almost all parents of children who attended the programme about the manner in which the summer provision programme enabled their children to start learning again outside the family home, and the extent to which the programme enabled their children to make up at least some of the learning gaps caused by the school closure. Almost all parents agreed or strongly agreed that their child enjoyed attending and that the programme helped their child to reconnect with the school, their teachers and their friends. Principals of participant schools viewed the programme as being successful in their schools. Many principals identified achievements for pupils in relation to engagement, wellbeing, routines, social skills, safety procedures and general happiness. However, many principals reported that they were unhappy with the lack of availability of transport for some of the pupils who, in their opinion, most deserved a place on the programme.

In 2020, the Department offered a summer programme to DEIS schools for the first time

For the first time in the history of the DEIS scheme, the Department offered a summer programme to all DEIS post-primary schools in 2020. This policy decision was based on the evidence gathered by inspectors during school closures from March 2020. The rationale for providing the programme to the most marginalised learners was grounded in the significant impact that school closures had on learners and their families. The impact related, in particular, to student wellbeing and the digital divide between pupils/students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds and those for whom access to a digital device was readily available.

The aims of the programme were to provide students with the opportunity to reconnect with school, teachers and peers, and to re-establish these important relationships, and also to support students to reintegrate/transition with their peers into their planned education setting for the next school year.

The Inspectorate developed a guidance framework and documentation to support schools in developing a summer programme to suit their own context. The Inspectorate had oversight of a programme of CPD for schools undertaking the programme.

The Inspectorate evaluation of the summer programme in DEIS post-primary schools in 2020 found that the participating students experienced a range of benefits

As part of a review of the value of the summer programme and its impact on students, inspectors engaged in discussion with senior management in fifteen schools that provided the programme. These discussions followed up on the schools' own internal evaluation of the programme, in which they were encouraged to capture feedback from students on their experience of the programme. The findings were very positive; they indicated that the students experienced improved wellbeing, a greater sense of connectedness, enhanced social skills and improved self-confidence in relation to transitioning to the next stage of their education. They also noted that students in the participating schools also experienced decreased anxiety levels.

6.5. SPECIALISED PROVISION

During the 2016-2020 period, the Inspectorate also evaluated a range of specialised educational provision. This provision is intended for groups of learners whose needs are not met within mainstream primary or post-primary schools. The specialised provision evaluated by the Inspectorate included the following:

- schools attached to Special Care Units (SCU) and school attached to the Children Detention Centre (CDC)
- Youthreach centres
- schools within Emergency Reception and Orientation Centres (EROCs)
- educational provision in schools attached to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) units

6.5.1 SPECIAL CARE UNITS AND CHILDREN DETENTION CENTRES

Evaluations were carried out on the range of specialised provision in place for children and young people in detention and care

Currently, there are six schools and one special class attached to a mainstream school that cater for children in detention and care in the State. The schools that are attached to Special Care Units (SCUs) cater mostly for children who are the subject of special care orders granted by the courts. The school attached to the Children Detention Centre (CDC) caters for children who have been convicted or placed on remand by the courts.

These schools have low pupil-teacher ratios and, typically, the students have access to a range of therapeutic supports as required. As placements in SCUs and the CDC are time-limited, students in the schools attached to them are enrolled for various time periods and, for example, some may not attend for a full school year. This arrangement presents unique challenges in terms of continuity of learning for students in these settings.

The Inspectorate conducts annual inspections in schools attached to SCUs and the CDC. Fourteen inspections of schools attached to the CDC and SCUs have been carried out since 2017, and the reports arising from these evaluations have been published and are available on the Department's _website_. Four follow-through inspections have also been completed. These inspections are largely conducted by primary and post-primary inspectors with experience and expertise in special education.

Links between schools attached to Special Care Units/the Children Detention Centre and outside agencies are generally good. There is scope to improve the implementation of actions in student support plans

Evaluation reports since 2017 indicate that links between schools attached to Special Care Units (SCUs)/ Children Detention Centre (CDC) and outside agencies, including previous educational settings, tend to be good. However, a need to ensure that the information gathered informed provision for students was noted in some reports. Some evaluation reports of inspections conducted in 2019/2020 describe good practice in relation to the accurate identification of student individual needs and the development of student support plans. Issues related to the implementation of actions in student support plans and ensuring that the plans fully inform teaching and learning were also noted.

More specific and targeted teaching of literacy and numeracy skills is required in schools attached to Special Care Units and the Children Detention Centre

In general, inspectors found that literacy and numeracy were taught in an integrated manner across the various subjects in schools attached to SCUs and the CDC. While such integrated teaching was generally appropriate, the majority of inspection reports recommended more comprehensive and specific teaching of literacy and numeracy to target and address students' identified needs. Additionally, inspectors found that more comprehensive monitoring and recording of achievement in literacy and numeracy were required.

The curriculum is varied, but aspects of the relationships and sexuality education programme were not provided in a significant minority of schools attached to Special Care Units

The curriculum offered in schools attached to Special Care Units (SCUs) and the Children Detention Centre (CDC) is varied, and includes Junior and Leaving Certificate programmes, Leaving Certificate Applied, Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) programmes, and the primary curriculum. Not all of these programmes are offered in all settings. Some reports identified a need to broaden the curriculum to ensure that it was meeting students' needs. Additionally, some reports recommended greater levels of challenge in the curricular programmes provided to ensure that students had every opportunity to reach their potential.

Over half of the schools attached to SCUs and the CDC were reported to be compliant with the *Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools 2017*. The remaining settings did not meet the requirements due to their failure to provide aspects of the *Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) programme*; it was recommended in these cases that this be addressed as a matter of urgency.

In most, though not all of the evaluation reports, leadership and management and engagement with School Self-Evaluation (SSE) were reported to be good or very good. In two settings, inspectors consistently recommended the need for improvement in aspects of leadership and management over a number of reports. Every report noted the very high quality of support for students, and the caring relationships between staff and students.

6.5.2 YOUTHREACH CENTRES

The Inspectorate conducts a range of evaluations in Youthreach centres

Youthreach centres are designated as 'centres for education' under the *Education Act 1998*. Almost 3,700 Youthreach places are provided by Education and Training Boards (ETBs) for unemployed early school leavers, who are between fifteen and twenty years of age and who do not have either qualifications or vocational training. There are just over 100 Youthreach centres nationwide. The programme usually provides two years of integrated education, training and work experience.

The Inspectorate carries out a range of evaluations of Youthreach centres, including whole-centre evaluations, incidental inspections and follow-through inspections. During the period covered by this report, eighty-nine evaluations were conducted in Youthreach centres.

Atmosphere and levels of care and pastoral support were reported to be generally very good in Youthreach centres

Findings from the evaluations conducted by the Inspectorate indicate that Youthreach centres were successful in creating and fostering a climate conducive to fostering learning, and the levels of care and pastoral support in the centres were generally very good. Surveys, administered as part of the inspection process, showed that relationships between teachers and students in Youthreach centres were very positive overall; 95% of students reported that their teachers listen to them and pay attention to what they say and 75% of students reported that they had a say in how to make their centre better.

The very high level of commitment shown by centre management and staff to students was a key strength of Youthreach centres. Supporting young people to develop their life skills is a fundamental aspect of the work of the centres; inspectors reported that this support was particularly effective in centres where a whole-centre approach was evident. Inspection reports noted the widespread good or very good practice in the operation of the key-worker system that links social and personal supports to the teaching and training aspects of the experience of the young people.

While measures to promote attendance were good, students' attendance remained as an area of challenge in most centres. Inspections showed that, overall, ETBs provided valuable support in relation to curriculum development, resourcing, policy development and continuing professional development. Where centre self-evaluation and development planning processes were effective, the young people attending the centre were consulted in those processes and their views were taken into account in the subsequent plans.

Teaching and learning were good or very good in most Youthreach centres

Findings relating to centre evaluations and incidental inspections show that teaching and learning in Youthreach centres were generally good. The attainment of learning objectives was good or very good in 83% of lessons, and teaching approaches were also good or very good in 78% of lessons observed. Recommendations about teaching and learning generally referred to the need to give more careful attention to collaborative learning approaches, the tailoring of lesson content to meet students' individual needs and approaches to teachers' planning. The use of digital technology was also noted as an area for development in some centres.

Practice in Youthreach centres in relation to provision for learners' individual needs and assessment requires development

In general, inspectors found Youthreach centre staff to be competent in carrying out initial assessments. In some Youthreach centres, individual learning plans were used effectively to document, monitor and guide provision and to ensure that students benefitted from a holistic approach to learning, training and development. However, in a number of centres, inspectors noted the need for teachers to ensure that provision was better aligned to students' identified needs. In particular, a more whole-centre approach to literacy and numeracy provision was recommended in a number of centres.

In centre evaluations, the overall quality of assessment was found to be good or very good in 65% of cases. The use of assessment to support learning was found to be good or very good in 76% of lessons observed. These figures indicate scope for improvement in the area of assessment. While survey responses indicated that 95% of students felt that teachers/tutors provided feedback on how to improve their learning, inspectors noted that overall, centre staff needed to ensure that higher quality assessment practices were in place.

Sourcing suitably qualified teachers is a challenge for Youthreach centres

The difficulty of sourcing suitably qualified teachers was reported by Youthreach centres as an area of concern. In some centres, the curriculum was limited by the availability of subject specialists. It may be necessary for ETBs to work together to find a solution, which may involve further sharing of teachers between mainstream ETB schools and Youthreach centres, to ensure that all students have access to appropriate teaching and learning in as broad a range of curricular areas as possible and that the curriculum can be more fully determined by student needs.

6.5.3 EMERGENCY RECEPTION AND ORIENTATION CENTRES

The Department has funded education provision in emergency reception and orientation centres as an interim measure

During 2016 and 2017, three emergency reception and orientation centres (EROCs) were established by the Department of Justice and Equality to accommodate refugees from the Mediterranean crisis for a period of three months before their resettlement around the country. There were delays in the resettlement process resulting in many families remaining in the EROCs for considerably longer than three months.

At the time of the establishment of the EROCs, it was envisaged that learners in all three centres would attend local schools as a means of supporting their integration. While this had been possible for some learners, a reported lack of capacity in local schools resulted in a decision to create capacity for education provision within the centres themselves. At this time, the education provision within the EROCs was initiated as an interim measure to assist with the initial reception and orientation of refugee families in a situation where enrolment in local schools was not always possible. The Department funded the education provision through the local ETBs.

Joint Inspectorate and National Educational Psychological Service visits were undertaken to establish the nature and quality of educational provision in emergency reception and orientation centres

In autumn 2017, the Department's Social Inclusion Unit, the Inspectorate, and the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) decided that teams comprising an inspector and a NEPS psychologist would visit each EROC to establish the nature and quality of educational provision. This was the first time that inspectors and psychologists worked collaboratively on evaluative work in an educational setting. Both brought their own focus to the work, and the joint approach added significant insights and value to the published composite report. The visits were conducted in December 2017 and January 2018 by prior arrangement with the Irish Refugee Protection Programme and the Centre Managers.

Teaching and learning were of a high quality in emergency reception and orientation centres; non-recognition of schools has given rise to challenges

Information collected by the inspectors and psychologists during their visits to the EROCs was collated into a joint composite report, *Findings of Joint Inspectorate and NEPS Visits to Education Settings in Emergency Reception and Orientation Centres (EROCs)*. The report noted that the EROCs provided an effective interim response to the educational needs of children and young people. It has been published on the Department's website together with the Department's response to the report, which outlined the actions to be implemented arising from the report's recommendations.

The non-recognition of these schools by the Department (and the consequent non-issuing of roll numbers to them) was identified at the time as a barrier to their teachers accessing continuing professional development (CPD) and to the provision of supports for pupils/students by the National Council for Special Education. However, NEPS developed and delivered a one-day training programme for the EROCs and the local receiving schools to assist them with the inclusion of the children and young people. This involved the development of a resource pack for schools supporting children from refugee families. NEPS also included the teachers in their national CPD programme, and continues to offer all available training courses to these teachers. Non-recognition also gave rise to a range of other regulatory challenges, such as uncertainty about the relevance of Department Circulars for the settings and responsibility for school attendance monitoring.

Teaching and learning were found to be of a high quality in these settings. It was evident that pupils/students were supported in a safe and positive environment, and that their personal and language skills were developed very effectively. Children and young people in the EROCs presented with a great diversity of individual need. The necessity to develop systems to identify, record and communicate these needs was highlighted in the report findings. Similarly, the report findings pointed to the need for learning programmes to be appropriate to individual needs and strengths. The report noted the relatively restricted curriculum for post-primary students, attributing this to staffing levels and teachers' limited subject expertise. It was also acknowledged that additional work should be undertaken to elicit the experiences and viewpoints of refugee children and their parents.

A range of issues has arisen in relation to the transition and integration of learners from emergency reception and orientation centres into mainstream schools

Particular issues were identified regarding the transition of learners to, and their integration into, local mainstream schools. Commendably, all EROCs had plans in place to increase their links with local schools to support learners in their transition to mainstream education. However, at the time of publication of the EROC composite report (2018), it was noted that no centre had been able to integrate its learners systematically into the nearest mainstream primary schools. To promote inclusion, the report advised that the barriers to this integration be examined further by the Department to ascertain if some concessions in grant aid, staffing or other supports to the local mainstream schools could provide a solution. The report also highlighted the need to integrate second-level students into local mainstream schools after a

very short period of familiarisation in an EROC school. Delays also arose, on occasion, in the assessment of and provision of additional supports to pupils/students in EROCs when families were moved out of EROC centres and transferred to new centres at short notice; this was because the process for the children who needed additional support had to start again once they arrived in their new schools.

The Department put measures in place arising from the report on emergency reception and orientation centres

In its response to the report, the Department provided additional staffing to the EROCs to assist with earlier transition of their pupils into local mainstream schools after a maximum stay of three months at the EROC. These teachers work between the local schools and the centres to assist with communication, transition planning and inclusion. The Department has provided clarity for the EROCs and ETBs regarding the regulatory challenges identified in the report, and there are improved mechanisms for teachers to access relevant CPD and other supports. The Inspectorate has developed an alternative education evaluation model to conduct annual inspections in EROCs and other similar educational settings and it is envisaged that further inspections of the centres will take place in 2022. The Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST) is also providing support to help post-primary schools to meet English as an Additional Language (EAL) needs of students more effectively.

6.5.4 SCHOOLS ATTACHED TO CHILD AND YOUNG PERSON MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES UNITS

The Department funds education provision in four on-site schools attached to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services inpatient units

A small number of children and young people occasionally experience mental health difficulties to the extent that they cannot function effectively in their daily lives without accessing the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). These children and young people remain in their mainstream schools while being treated for their mental health difficulties. A very small cohort of children and young people experience severe and often complex mental health disorders. They may be referred to CAMHS inpatient units in order to achieve clinical improvement and successful reintegration into home, education and social activities.

There are four schools attached to these CAMHS inpatient units that seek to provide continuity of education for children and young people who are temporarily absent from mainstream school due to their medical needs. They also seek to support the young people's reintegration into mainstream education at the end of their stay in the unit. CAMHS education programmes run concurrent to a young person's therapeutic engagement while attending the CAMHS inpatient unit.

Inspection findings highlight the nature and breadth of curricular and co-curricular provision in schools attached to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services units; there is considerable variation in the quality of planning and assessment

The four CAMHS schools were evaluated in 2019 and a report, _Review of Education Provision in Schools Attached to CAMHS Units_, which presents the collated findings, was published by the Department in July 2020. Inspectors noted the variety of governance structures for the four schools, the very effective leadership and management practices in some schools, and the broad range of educational supports in place in all four schools. The report highlighted the holistic nature and breadth of curricular and co-curricular provision in these schools. There was positive commentary on the commitment of teachers to CPD, and the provision of appropriate learning plans, including the continuation of modules for school programmes, such as the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA).

There was, however, some variation in the quality of practice in the four schools. The quality of available written evidence for planning and assessment practices ranged from good to poor. While these schools face considerable challenges with planning for pupils/students whose attendance may be transient, attention to information that can help to ensure continuity of learning for such pupils/students is all the more important. Attendance records also varied in the level of detail presented. Some, though not all, schools had built up very close relationships with pupils'/students' base schools and centres for education.

6.6 KEY MESSAGES

Unprecedented growth in provision

- The growth in the number of special educational needs teachers has exceeded the growth of pupil/student numbers in schools. This is mainly attributable to the larger proportion of students with special educational needs (SEN) enrolling in post-primary schools.

- The rate of growth in the numbers of special needs assistants (SNAs) in schools has been unprecedented and is greatly in excess of the growth in the student population generally.

Quality of special education provision

- Inspection findings indicate that the quality of teaching of children with special educational needs (SEN) in primary schools is good or very good in most instances.

- During the early phase of implementing the new special education teaching (SET) models, in a minority of the primary and post-primary schools reviewed, additional teaching resources provided for the purposes of assisting the school in meeting the special educational needs of some children were not deployed in accordance with the terms of Circular 13/2017 or Circular 14/2017.

- Because considerably fewer post-primary SEN inspections have been completed, the extent of inspection findings at post-primary level is somewhat more limited. Nonetheless, it is of some concern that the quality of teaching and learning at this level was just satisfactory in a significant minority of the lessons that were observed. Similarly, the gap in reported parental satisfaction with aspects of provision for children with SEN warrants further consideration.

- A number of important aspects that relate to provision for children with autism require attention including enrolment practices, review of placements and the integration of learners attending special classes into mainstream provision

Quality of DEIS provision

- The quality of leadership of the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) action planning for improvement process in schools requires improvement in a significant minority of schools.

- There is scope to develop DEIS action planning in relation to attendance, particularly in post-primary schools.

- Post-primary schools in the DEIS programme require additional support to assist them in ensuring that data and information available in the schools are used to best effect in the planning process.

- The learning outcomes of pupils in the target group were tracked clearly in only half of the DEIS schools included in the SEN review.

- In DEIS schools, students' attitudes towards Mathematics become more negative as they progress through the school system. Addressing this will require the focused attention of schools and of the teacher support services.

- Support teachers were effective in enhancing educational opportunities for learners with behavioural difficulties, but they need to monitor learners' progress and achievements systematically; their roles and responsibilities also need to be clarified.

Other specialised provision

- The atmosphere and levels of care and pastoral support were reported to be generally very good in Youthreach centres.

- While links between schools attached to special care units (SCUs) and the Children Detention Centre (CDC) and outside agencies were found to be generally good, there is scope to ensure that actions identified in pupils'/students' support plans inform teaching and learning.

- Emergency Reception and Orientation Centres (EROCs) were found to have provided an effective interim response to the educational needs of children and young people. Issues were identified in relation to the transition of pupils/students to, and their integration into local mainstream schools.

- Schools attached to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) units were found to provide holistic and broad curricular and co-curricular programmes but there is scope to develop their planning and assessment practices.

6.7 LOOKING FORWARD

SEN policy and supports

- Policy makers and education partners will need to reflect on the effectiveness and inclusiveness of current provision as they plan for Ireland's future response to the obligations arising from the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

- An induction programme should be established for newly-appointed support teachers to guide them in target setting and the tracking of learner outcomes, and to provide clarity for schools and teachers on the roles, responsibilities and deployment of the support teacher.

- Enrolment policies in classes for pupils/students with autism and other special classes should prioritise places for those with complex needs, and pupils/students with less complex needs should be included in mainstream classes with appropriate support.

Practice in special education settings

- Teachers' collaborative practices, both in planning interventions and in the facilitation of lessons, should be further developed to support the needs of learners with SEN.

- Assessment information [22] should be utilised to greater effect in special education settings as a means of supporting learner progression.

DEIS

- Action planning for improvement in DEIS schools should place additional focus on attendance, examination attainment (post-primary only) and making learning interesting for learners, particularly in the area of numeracy.

Other specialised provision

- Systems to identify, record and communicate the needs of learners in EROCs should be established, in conjunction with the development of learning programmes appropriate to their individual needs and strengths.

- Further sharing of teachers may be required between mainstream Education and Training Board schools and Youthreach centres to ensure that all learners have access to appropriate teaching and learning in as broad a range of curricular areas as possible and that the curriculum can be more fully determined by learner needs.

---

22 *This assessment information will include, as appropriate, teacher observation and progress records, evidence from classroom, standardised or diagnostic screening tests, reviews of pupil/student support plans, recommendations from professional reports, and relevant information from parents and other teachers.*

7

Partnerships with Parents and Learners

7.1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter focuses on important partnerships that enhance children's and young people's learning. When schools and settings work well with the communities and families that they serve, the education and wellbeing of children and young people can be enhanced considerably. Giving voice and agency to children, young people and their parents[1] is a key element of partnership. The importance of such partnerships is recognised officially in public policies and documents, as well as in national strategies. To enable children and young people to express their views, we must give them opportunities to form that view, and they also should know that it will be listened to, and acted upon, as appropriate. Meaningful partnerships with parents require recognition of the role of parents, and their right to be involved in their child's education, as well as practical strategies to ensure genuine partnerships can be established and maintained.

The first part of this chapter looks at two aspects of these relationships: firstly, the partnerships that schools and settings foster with parents, and secondly, how schools and settings listen and respond to the voices of children/young people and their parents and promote their participation in meaningful ways.

Engaging more fully with children, young people and their parents is not just a task for schools, early learning and care (ELC) settings or other education settings. Alongside the Tusla Early Years Inspectorate and other bodies concerned with supporting the quality of provision, the Inspectorate of the Department of Education is conscious that it, too, must listen to and include the perspectives of children/young people and their parents during inspections, given the valuable and unique insights that they can provide into educational provision in schools and the importance of valuing and respecting their views. We are mindful that a well-integrated system of evaluation combines the external perspectives of inspectors with the reflective and collective insights of leaders, educators/teachers, parents and children/young people in schools and early learning and care settings in order to better understand the quality of education provision. We are also mindful of the need to ensure that parents, children and young people are given information about the quality of the education provided in the school or setting that has been inspected. The provision of this information serves an important accountability and improvement function by promoting transparency and discourse about quality in education settings. In the September 2016 to December 2020 period, the Inspectorate developed its processes in a number of ways so that the insights of children/young people and their parents could be incorporated more effectively into its work. We are also looking at how we can improve how we give parents, children and young people information about the quality of the education provided in settings/schools. The second part of this chapter describes this aspect of the Inspectorate's work.

---

1   *The term parent is used to refer to a child's father(s) and/or mother(s) and/or guardian(s).*

Context

There is increasing recognition in public policy of the importance of partnership with parents, children and young people

Ireland was the first country in Europe to develop a national strategy on children and young people's participation in decision-making

Comhairle na nÓg continued to provide young people with opportunities to participate in influencing local and national policy

The Education (Student and Parent Charter) Bill was published in September 2019

Looking at our School 2016 gives prominence to partnership between parents and schools

Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (2009) highlights the importance of parents and early years educators working together to enhance children's learning and development
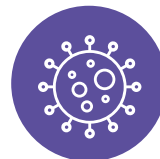
Home-school links gained additional importance during the COVID-19 pandemic

Inspections and consultations with partners

Survey findings:

95% Primary
95% Post-primary

93% Primary
83% Post-primary

96% Primary
88% Post-primary

92% Primary
89% Post-primary

30% Post-primary

48% Primary
23% Post-primary

95% of parents (primary and post-primary) reported that they had been informed of the rules in their child's school

Most parents (**93%** Primary; **83%** Post-primary) were satisfied with the arrangements for parent-teacher meetings

Most parents (**96%** Primary, **88%** Post-primary) knew who to talk to in the school if there was a problem

Most parents (**92%** Primary, **89%** Post-primary) report that school reports gave a good picture of learner progress

30% of post-primary parents did not feel consulted on school matters

Fewer than half of pupils/students (**48%** Primary; **23%** Post-primary) felt that they had a say in how things were done in their school

Some key messages

Parental involvement impacts positively on children's and young people's learning outcomes and experiences

Children and young people should be provided with meaningful opportunities to contribute to decisions that affect them in schools and education settings

There is potential to improve aspects of communication between schools/education settings and parents

There is need to harness the potential of digital technology to support effective communication and new forms of partnerships

7.2. BUILDING PARTNERSHIPS WITH PARENTS

7.2.1 THE RESEARCH AND POLICY CONTEXT

Research, legislation and *Looking at our School 2016: A Quality Framework for Primary/Post-Primary Schools* highlight and give effect to the importance of partnerships in schools

Partnership with parents involves parents and early years educators/teachers working together to share information and expertise, and making decisions that benefit children and young people. Partnership involves responsibility on both sides, with each recognising, respecting and valuing what the other does and says.[2] A supportive and open relationship between parents and the setting/school is a pre-requisite for effective partnership. Open communication is essential to building and maintaining positive relations between parents and settings or schools.

Effective partnership with parents is a powerful lever in raising achievement in schools; research findings highlight that children do better when their parents are involved actively with their child's education.[3] The research indicates that parental participation in their child's learning can enhance children's self-esteem, increase their motivation and engagement with learning, and improve their learning outcomes.[4]

The building of partnership by schools with parents is underpinned by the _Education Act 1998_. In line with the Act, parents are entitled to know how their child is doing at school and to access records kept by the school relating to their child's progress. _Section 22_ of the Act requires schools to assess pupil/student progress regularly and to report the results of these assessments to the pupils/students and their parents periodically. Similarly, under the _Data Protection Act_ (1988 and 2003), parents are entitled to their children's results in any assessments, including standardised tests, that a school has administered.

Looking at our School 2016 (LAOS), the quality framework which is designed to underpin both school self-evaluation and school inspections, gives prominence to partnership between parents and schools. As outlined in LAOS, principals and other school leaders are expected to build and maintain very constructive relationships with all school partners and to engage in effective and regular communication with them using a range of media. Schools are also expected to seek and listen to the opinions of others, and engage formally and effectively in dialogue with partners.

Legislation and a range of policy documents, frameworks and interventions promote partnerships with parents in early learning and care settings

In relation to partnership with parents, the _Child Care Act 1991 (Early Years Services) Regulations 2016_ (under which Tusla carries out its statutory inspections) set out under Regulation 16 the information in relation to the service which early learning and care (ELC) service providers must share with parents, including the service's policies and procedures. Tusla's _Early Years Quality and Regulatory Framework_, which is designed to support services in meeting the regulatory requirements, explains further that all relevant information about the service, the type of care provided and the facilities available, should be shared with parents in a way they can understand. This includes any updates to policies and procedures. Records in relation to individual children must also be available to their own parents to review.

The _Aistear_ curriculum framework and _Síolta, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education_ highlight the important role that parents and families play in children's lives. The two frameworks provide

2   NCCA (2017) Aistear The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework. Available at: https://ncca.ie/en/resources/aistear-the-early-childhood-curriculum-framework/

3   O'Toole, L., Kiely, J. and McGillicuddy, D. (2019) Parental involvement, engagement and partnership in their children's education during the primary school years. National Parents Council. Available at: https://researchrepository.ucd.ie/bitstream/10197/9823/2/Parental%20Involvement%20Research%20Doc.pdf; Emerson, L., Fear. J., Fox, S. and Sanders, E. (2012) Parental engagement in learning and schooling: Lessons from research. Available at: http://www.familyschool.org.au/files/3313/7955/2295/parental-engagement-in-learning-and-schooling.pdf; Kelley-Laine, K. (1998) Overview of 9 OECD Nations: Parents as Partners in Schooling: The Current State of Affairs, Childhood Education, 74(6): 342-345, DOI: 10.1080/00094056.1998.10521146

4   Desforges, C. and Abouchaar, A. (2003) The impact of parental involvement, parental support and family education on pupil achievement and adjustment: A literature review. London: DfES. Available at: http://www.thelizlibrary.org/liz/parenting-and-educational-achievement.pdf

ideas and suggestions to help early years educators build good relationships with parents and families, and work together with parents to support children's learning and development; the two frameworks also provide ideas on how to involve parents in the ELC setting. Building partnership with parents is one of the pillars of the *Aistear Síolta Practice Guide*, which supports partnership with parents through self-evaluation tools, examples and ideas of practice, resources for sharing with parents, and action planning tools.

The *Access and Inclusion Model* (AIM), led by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY), also supports partnership with parents in meeting its objective of helping all children, regardless of ability, to access quality ELC through the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme, and creating a more inclusive culture in pre-schools. As part of AIM, *Better Start* early years specialists work collaboratively with parents, pre-school providers, and with other professionals to develop inclusive learning environments in pre-schools. This includes the creation of an access and inclusion plan for a child, which is prepared collaboratively between the child's parents and the ELC service, and which can help identify additional supports and resources required to meet the needs of the child in the pre-school room.

In addition, *First 5: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019-2028* commits to facilitate and encourage greater parental involvement and engagement in early learning in ELC settings through a range of actions, including the development of advice, guidance and training for ELC settings to build effective working relationships with parents, families and communities; supports for ELC settings to create opportunities to encourage and strengthen involvement of parents such as parent–practitioner meetings, parental advisory boards, home–ELC liaison officers, designated staff with responsibility for supporting parents, including initiatives in collaboration with the *National Parents Council* (Early Years) and the development and use of appropriate methods to take account of the views of children and parents in the inspection of ELC.

During COVID-19, DCEDIY and funded support organisations provided guidance to ELC and SAC settings and parents in relation to continued engagement and communication. Guidance included supporting children's return to ELC and SAC settings, and supports on working together and ways to connect, and has involved guidance, frequently asked questions, information sheets, and animated videos with key messages.

7.2.2 THE FINDINGS OF INSPECTIONS ON PARTNERSHIPS WITH PARENTS

Early learning and care settings and schools shared relevant information well with parents

Sharing information with parents about their child, and building up good communications between parents and settings/schools are essential for good partnership with parents.

Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (2009) highlights the importance of parents and early years educators working together to enhance children's learning and development. Features of good practice observed in ELC settings during early years education inspections (EYEIs), conducted between September 2016 and December 2020, included informal communication with parents on their child's daily experiences, and the sharing of details relating to the curriculum and early years educators' planning.

In primary schools, special schools and post-primary schools, inspection findings indicated that schools used a broad range of strategies to share information with, and involve, parents, for example through open evenings, the school website, newsletters and texts. The findings from parent surveys, administered during whole-school type evaluations in the September 2016 to December 2020 period, indicated that schools shared information in relation to pertinent school polices effectively with parents. For example, almost all parents (95% in primary and special schools; 95% in post-primary schools) agreed that they had been informed of the school's code of behaviour/school rules. Most (89% in primary and special schools; 88% in post-primary schools) agreed that they had been informed of the school's anti-bullying policy (Table 7.1).

Table 7.1: Parental responses to survey statements related to communication of policies in whole-school type evaluations in primary (P) and special (S) schools, and post-primary (PP) schools: September 2016 - December 2020

Survey Statement	Strongly Agree		Agree		Don't know		Disagree		Strongly Disagree	
	P&S	PP	P&S	PP	P&S	PP	P&S	PP	P&S	PP
I have been informed of the school's code of behaviour/school rules	64.0%	51.3%	30.9%	43.9%	3.2%	2.3%	1.5%	1.9%	0.4%	0.6%
I have been informed of the school's anti-bullying policy	58.2%	45.2%	30.7%	43.2%	6.8%	6.0%	3.5%	4.4%	0.8%	1.1%

Digital technologies were used to build and maintain good relationships with parents

Examples of effective practice regarding the use of digital technologies to engage with parents were noted in an evaluation of digital learning that was conducted by the Inspectorate in ELC settings during 2019. These examples included the effective use of digital technologies to share children's learning experiences and samples of their work with their parents. During the period of school closure in 2020, there was similar digital engagement by teachers with parents in relation to the sharing of learning activities and the forwarding of completed work, particularly in the case of younger children. During whole-school evaluations in primary schools, special schools and post-primary schools in the September 2016 to December 2020 period, inspectors observed very effective use of digital technologies, such as apps, websites, learning platforms, social media and email, to facilitate regular communication between school and home.

There was scope to enhance the formal sharing of information about children's progress in early learning and care settings

Clear channels of communication can facilitate parents' meaningful involvement in their child's education and their child's development as a learner. By maintaining regular contact with parents about their children's learning, ELC settings and schools can help parents to support their child's learning and progress. Meetings with early years educators can provide valuable opportunities for parents to discuss their child's progress, and to understand how they can work best with the early years educators to help their child to learn.

Relationships with parents were found to be generally very good in ELC settings, with many settings operating an open-door policy where parents were welcome in the setting throughout the day and included as part of the daily life of the setting. Inspection findings indicated that early years educators frequently used drop-off and collection times to informally share children's achievements and learning experiences with parents. Early years educators also invited parents into the learning room to view photographs and samples of the children's creative work. Examples of practice observed in highly-effective settings included enabling children and parents to look at learning journals together, take them home, and comment on and add to the content regularly. While commending these informal approaches, inspectors highlighted the potential for settings to provide more formal opportunities for the sharing of information with parents in relation to their child's progress and the next steps to be taken to progress their learning, for example, more frequent sharing of records of children's learning with their parents.

Parents indicated satisfaction with how schools reported to them on their child's progress

In their responses to surveys administered by the Inspectorate during whole-school evaluations (WSEs), most parents (93% in primary and special schools; 83% in post-primary schools) reported that they were satisfied with the arrangements for parent-teacher meetings (Table 7.2). During these inspections, most respondents (92% in primary and special schools; 89% in post-primary schools) also agreed that school reports gave a good picture of how their child was doing. At post-primary level, inspection reports commented favourably on the mechanisms that were in place in many post-primary schools to report on student progress to parents.

Parental responses to the Inspectorate surveys administered during WSE inspections also indicated that, overall, parents knew who to talk to in the school if there was a problem (96% in primary and special schools; 88% in post-primary schools).

Table 7.2: Parental responses to survey statements related to feedback in whole-school type evaluations in primary (P) and special (S) schools, and post-primary (PP) schools: September 2016 - December 2020

Survey Statement	Strongly Agree		Agree		Don't know		Disagree		Strongly Disagree	
	P&S	PP	P&S	PP	P&S	PP	P&S	PP	P&S	PP
I am satisfied with the arrangements for parent teachers meetings	57.3%	31.9%	35.5%	51.4%	3.0%	4.1%	3.5%	9.7%	0.8%	3.0%
I know who to talk to in the school if there is a problem	62.4%	39.3%	33.2%	48.7%	2.7%	6.6%	1.1%	3.9%	0.5%	1.5%
School reports give a good picture of how my child is doing	56.7%	37.1%	35.7%	51.6%	4.4%	3.8%	2.8%	6.2%	0.5%	1.2%

Source: Inspectorate, Department of Education
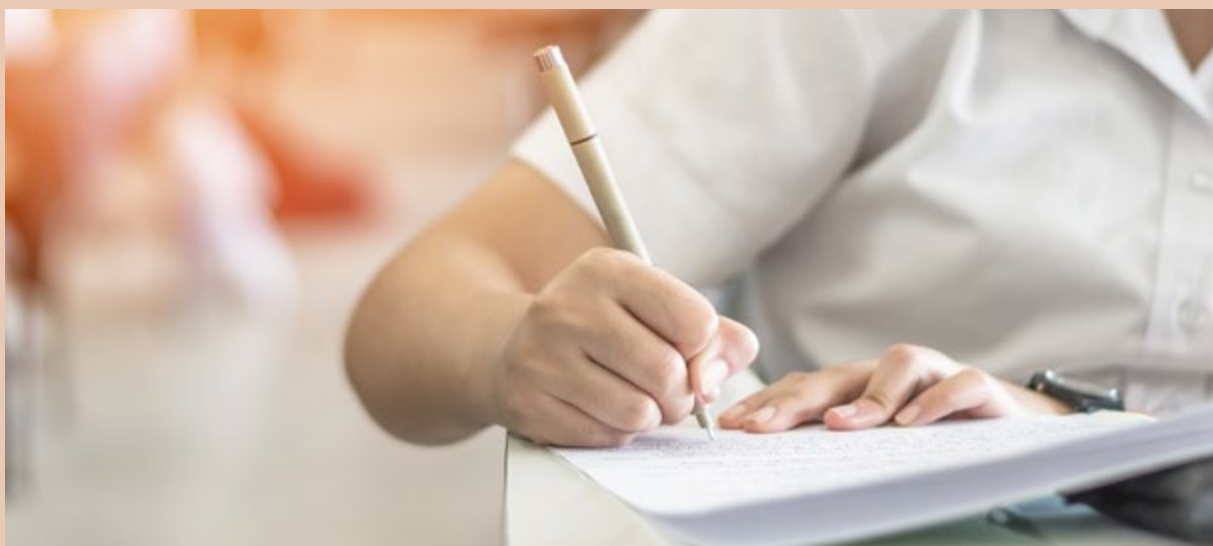
Schools and early learning and care settings employed a range of approaches to facilitate parental involvement in their child's learning; there is scope to develop the potential of meaningful parental involvement in learning further

To support children's learning, ELC settings generally provided parents with key information in relation to the curriculum and learning approaches. Other positive practices observed included enabling parents to spend time in the setting to engage in activities, and inviting them to contribute to activities that support their child's sense of identity and belonging, for example sharing photographs and information about their cultural background and community. Highly-effective practice included early years educators integrating children's interests from home into their learning in the settings, and working in partnership with parents to implement specific learning goals.

In primary schools, where effective partnerships between parents and the school in relation to learning were noted, a feature of good practice was parental involvement in curricular activities in the classroom. Examples of good practice included coding lessons being co-delivered by the teachers and a parent with expertise in this area.

Where effective practice was noted in Delivering Equality of Opportunity In Schools (DEIS) schools, parents were very aware of their child's progress and of the many DEIS initiatives being implemented. These interventions were aligned explicitly with targets for partnership with parents. Parents were also encouraged to participate actively in a range of activities, for example *Maths for Fun*, *Reading for Fun*, *Children and Parents Enjoying Reading* (CAPER) and 'station work' with small groups. While partnership with parents was reported to be generally good in Gaeltacht schools, inspectors reported the need to strengthen links between schools and their local school communities through the greater use of local language-planning initiatives.

The parent association is a valuable and practical support for the school's work; its advisory role can be strengthened

Parent associations or parent councils provide a valuable and practical support for the work of schools. Examples of parent association activities noted in inspections included the organisation of external speakers, fundraising, and supporting school-related activities. In some schools, inspectors identified scope to foster closer collaboration between the parents' representatives on the board of management and the parent association, and the need to provide the parent association with greater opportunities to contribute to policy development.

Parent associations and parent councils may choose to be affiliated with the _National Parents' Council-Primary_ (NPC-P) or the _National Parents' Council-Post-primary_ (NPC-PP). Both NPC-P and NPC-PP are recognised in the _Education Act 1998_ and they can provide advice and support to parents' associations and parents' councils in schools. Affiliated associations can receive training and support from NPC-P and NPC-PP to enable them to provide better services to parents, including training for the committees of parent associations and parent councils to help them participate fully in whole-school evaluations and in school self-evaluation.

In 2019, over 50% (1,667) of parent associations in primary schools and special schools were affiliated to the NPC-P. This represented a steady increase in membership since 2016 when 1571 parent associations in primary schools and special schools were affiliated. There was a decline in the membership to 1351 in 2020; this may be attributed to the COVID-19 pandemic when some parent associations were less active, either because of school closures or due to the impact of public health restrictions. At post-primary level, affiliation to the NPC-PP reached 48% of schools in the 2019/2020 school year. As in primary schools, this declined over the 2020/2021 period due the effects of COVID-19 on the school community and the difficulties school closures brought to the NPC-PP's engagement with the parent associations.

During inspections in the period to which this report refers, inspectors recommended frequently that parent associations and parent councils affiliate themselves to the national parents' councils, as the bodies that officially represent parents of pupils/students in primary and post-primary schools.

Inspectors reported that, in both Gaelcholáistí and Gaeltacht post-primary schools, parent associations were very supportive of school-based activities. However, they identified scope to develop the links between parent associations and the wider parent body further in the Irish-medium sector in general. In Gaeltacht schools in particular, they recommended that increased efforts be made by boards of management and parent associations to promote the benefits of bilingual and immersion education, and to inform parents of the specific Irish-language supports available for students as part of the *Gaeltacht School Recognition Scheme*.

Parental involvement can play a key role in helping and encouraging children and young people to learn foreign languages

Celebration and affirmation of the diversity of home languages can lead to improved learning outcomes for learners for whom English is an additional language, as well as enriching the language-learning environment, and enhancing the ways in which parents can support their child's learning and participation in settings and schools[5].

The Inspectorate's research during 2019 on aspects of the initial implementation of *Languages Connect, Ireland's Strategy for Foreign Languages in Education 2017-2026* found examples of strategies that were particularly effective in enhancing partnerships between parents and ELC settings/schools to support children and young people's learning. Some are detailed in the following Spotlights.

Spotlight...

Spotlight 1

In an early learning and care (ELC) setting visited during 2019, families for whom English is an additional language (EAL) were supported with a 'communication corner' which used symbols to enhance communication with the children and their parents. Prior to the settling-in period, early years educators met with parents. These opportunities were used to build positive relationships and to discuss the various approaches used by the early years educators to support children. They also organised an open-day to establish effective settling-in procedures. Early years educators used visual leaflets and a video to further support the children and families with EAL in their understanding of the ethos and procedures of the setting. Parents were also invited into the setting three times during the year, with language support provided if required, to discuss the children's learning and to explain their learning stories and experiences. In addition, a variety of visual displays, including a daily routine, helped to convey a wide range of information to support the children and families for whom English was an additional language.

Spotlight 2

The staff of a primary school researched how they could develop the language learning ability of their multilingual pupils so that those pupils could access the curriculum using home languages to 'fill in the gaps' in a meaningful way. Teachers provided English vocabulary and sentence structures to the pupils once they had had an opportunity to engage with the lesson topic in their home language. Parents and guardians were involved in this approach, and they worked with the school to enable younger pupils to produce 'Think and Talk' scrapbooks using topic-based pictures. These scrapbooks formed the basis of discussion between the child and the parent in their home language. In line with the school's work to promote linguistic diversity, home languages came to play a more prominent role in its events to mark internationalism.

---

5   Evans, M., Schneider, C., Arnot, M., Fisher, L., Forbes, K., Hu, M. and Liu, Y. (2016) *Language development and school achievement: Opportunities and challenges in the education of EAL students.*
    Available at: https://www.bell-foundation.org.uk/eal-programme/research/language-development-and-school-achievement/

There is scope to enhance parental involvement in governance and decision-making in early learning and care settings and schools

Inspection findings indicated that, while ELC settings and schools demonstrate strengths in communicating with parents, they are less successful in making provision for their involvement in governance and decision-making.

During the period September 2016 to December 2020, findings from EYEIs indicated that there is scope for ELC management to place additional emphasis on seeking parental views and inputs to inform the work of the ELC settings. These findings are consistent with those from the *Annual Early Years Sector Profile Report 2018-2019*[6], in which just over half of community services (52%) and 24% of private settings reported that they provide opportunities for parental involvement in governance and decision-making. It is recognised that the private, for-profit nature of a large proportion of ELC settings creates a different context for the involvement of parents in governance and decision-making; however, parental views on provision for their child are valuable in all cases and should be a feature of all high quality settings.

Inspection findings in primary schools, special schools and post-primary schools during this period also indicated that there was potential to improve the involvement of parents in school matters. In their responses to Inspectorate surveys carried out during whole-school type inspections, 13% of parents in primary and special schools and almost a third (30%) of parents in post-primary schools did not agree that the school sought their views on school matters regularly (Table 7.3). These survey findings suggest that boards of management, particularly at post-primary level, need to develop effective two-way channels of communication with parents. Whole-school evaluation reports of provision in primary and special schools and in post-primary schools highlight the benefits for schools in having a communication policy, and of ensuring that boards of management support good communication with parents. In this regard, the dissemination of agreed reports to parents after board meetings, and the preparation of an annual report for parents on the work of the school are important.

Table 7.3: Parental responses to survey statements related to parental involvement in school governance in whole-school type evaluations in primary (P) and special (S) schools and in post-primary (PP) schools: September 2016 - December 2020

Survey Statement	Strongly Agree		Agree		Don't know		Disagree		Strongly Disagree	
	P&S	PP	P&S	PP	P&S	PP	P&S	PP	P&S	PP
The school regularly seeks the views of parents on school matters	37.0%	14.2%	34.3%	31.8%	16.2%	24.4%	9.6%	22.6%	2.9%	7.1%

Source: Inspectorate, Department of Education

6   *Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) and Pobal (2019) 2018/19 Annual Early Years Sector Profile Report. Available at: https://www.pobal.ie/app/uploads/2019/12/Annual-Early-Years-Sector-Profile-Report-AEYSPR-2018-19.pdf*

Parental involvement in self-evaluation needs to be strengthened in both early learning and care settings and schools

Schools are required to involve parents in school self-evaluation (SSE) processes, and to provide a summary of their self-evaluation report and the school improvement plan to the whole school community.[7] The national curriculum and quality frameworks, Aistear and Síolta, encourage ELC settings to seek the views of parents when they are carrying out internal review of provision and practice, including self-evaluation processes.

For self-evaluation to be effective, it needs to be both inclusive and collaborative. Findings from EYEIs during the period September 2016 to March 2020 suggest that parental involvement in the processes of internal review, including self-evaluation processes, is an emerging feature of practice in this sector. Inspection findings in primary and special schools and in post-primary schools indicate that schools are taking action to involve parents in SSE; findings from WSEs during this period show that parental involvement in SSE was considered to be good or very good in almost half of the schools inspected (Table 7.4). Nevertheless, there is a need to develop this good practice further as parental involvement was considered to be just satisfactory in 30% of primary and special schools and in 32% of post-primary schools, and less than satisfactory in 14% of primary and special schools and 28% of post-primary schools. Similarly, inspection findings from a series of focused incidental inspections, undertaken in autumn 2019, indicated that parental participation was not a strong feature of the SSE process in the majority of schools visited (65%). Findings from DEIS evaluations during the September 2016 to December 2020 period also indicated that parents were not always provided with a summary report of the school's improvement targets and agreed actions arising from the SSE process. Although these findings suggest that ELC settings and schools need to be more active, inclusive and encouraging in involving parents in their self-evaluation processes, the close communication that schools have had to maintain with parents during the COVID-19 pandemic sets the scene for developing parental involvement further. This good practice in communicating with parents was supported by the advice the Department provided in the extensive range of guidance materials that it published during the pandemic in 2020 and 2021.[8] The Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) has also published a range of resources to assist parents with their child's learning, for example teaching their child new skills, facilitating learning through play, and supporting their child's transition to pre-school.[9]

Table 7.4 Parental involvement in school self-evaluation- whole school evaluations in primary and special schools and in post-primary schools: September 2016 - December 2020

Inspectors' ratings	Primary and Special	Post-primary
Very good	19.0%	11.4%
Good	36.8%	27.8%
Satisfactory	29.9%	32.4%
Fair	8.3%	17.4%
Weak	6.0%	11.0%

---

7   This requirement is outlined in Circular 0039/2016 (Primary) in Circular 0040/2016 (Post Primary) which are available respectively at: http://schoolself-evaluation.ie/primary/sse-2016-2020/circulars-and-guidelines/ and http://schoolself-evaluation.ie/post-primary/sse-2016-2020/circulars-and-guidelines/

8   The suite of guidance documents relating to Continuity of Schooling and Remote teaching and learning is available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/965639-continuity-of-schooling. The suite of guidance documents relating to Return to School is available at https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/f6ba5-additional-guidelines-and-procedures-for-primary-schools and https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/3cd09-additional-guidelines-and-procedures-for-post-primary-schools

9   The suite of 'Let's Get Ready' resources is available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/campaigns/1e8a3-lets-get-ready/

7.2.3 PARTNERSHIP WITH PARENTS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

During the COVID-19 pandemic, schools made increasing use of digital technologies to support parents' involvement in their child's learning

COVID-19 brought to the fore the value of partnerships, in particular home-school links, in providing for children's and young people's wellbeing and learning during the period of school closures. In ELC settings and schools, the experience of the pandemic has shown the importance of digital technologies to support communication with parents and their involvement in their child's learning. Guidance for schools from the Department emphasised the necessity for good whole-school systems to facilitate communication between home and school during the period of school closures. This guidance encouraged two-way feedback between teachers and parents/guardians, and between teachers and their pupils/students. The DCEDIY also highlighted the importance of maintaining clear two-way communication pathways for parents, staff and other stakeholders during the COVID-19 pandemic.[10]

It was clear from surveys of parents carried out by the Department in collaboration with the National Parents Council-Primary in April 2020 [11] that some schools struggled to achieve good levels of communication with parents during the early part of the pandemic. Home-school communication appeared to have been better during the second period of school closures in the January to March 2021 period compared with the situation in April 2020. Most primary and post-primary parents surveyed in February 2021 confirmed that their child's school had made them aware of their plan for remote teaching and learning. This was more positive than the responses to surveys carried out in April 2020 when, at both primary and post-primary levels, just three-quarters of parents indicated that their child's school had made them aware of their plans for remote teaching and learning.

Opportunities for parents to contact their child's school also improved between the first and second period of school closures during the pandemic. In the surveys conducted in February 2021, almost all parents at primary and special school levels reported that they could contact their child's teacher to seek advice or clarifications. In April 2020, one-quarter of parents of primary pupils had indicated that they did not have appropriate opportunities for contacting their child's school.

During the September to December 2020 period when schools had reopened, it was evident, from surveys and focus groups of parents conducted by the Inspectorate, that there was effective communication between schools and parents in relation to the COVID-19 measures that the schools had put in place to ensure the safe provision of schooling.

The improvements in communication with parents can be attributed, particularly in the case of primary schools, to the enhanced capacity of schools and teachers to use digital technologies during the course of the pandemic. The professional development support and resources provided by the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST) played a key role in building the capacity of schools and teachers.

Restrictions associated with the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the 'open door' policies that had been in place in many early learning and care settings

While ELC settings reopened for some children from June 2020, the infection prevention and control measures in place meant that parents of young children were restricted in accessing settings. This disrupted the 'open door' policies observed as good practice in many ELC settings and, while alternative methods to communicate with parents were put in place, much of this communication focused on logistical and health and safety matters. The sharing of information to support children's learning was reported by setting managers to be more challenging and less frequent. The re-establishment of these connections should be a priority for settings as infection prevention and control measures related to COVID-19 are eased.

---

10 *Source: Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth Affairs Advice during COVID-19-Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare: Maintaining Relationships. Available in Tipsheet 2 Maintaining Relationships at https://first5.gov.ie/guidance/providers-and-practitioners.*

11 *These surveys were conducted between 03 April and 07 April 2020 when schools were closed because of COVID-19. There were 8,053 responses to the survey of parents of primary school pupils and 1,806 responses to the post-primary survey. Tables on the findings of those surveys are included in the appendices of the following published report: Department of Education (2021) Remote teaching and learning: Summary of Inspectorate research, January – February 2021.*
Available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/de987-remote-teaching-and-learning-reports.

7.3. PROMOTING THE PARTICIPATION OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

There is an ever-growing awareness of the importance of valuing and facilitating the voice of children and young people

In 2015, Ireland was the first country in Europe to develop a national strategy on children and young people's participation in decision-making.[12] The goal of this strategy is to ensure that children and young people have a voice in their individual and collective everyday lives across five national outcome areas. The strategy is guided and influenced by Article 2 of the United Nation's Convention on the Rights of the Child, (UNCRC) and Article 3 of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights.

At a national level, structures such as Comhairle na nÓg provide young people with opportunities to participate in influencing local and national policy, planning and decision-making, while serving as a mechanism for consultation. Comhairle na nÓg has evolved from Goal 1 of the National Children's Strategy (2000)[13], which identified that children and young people should have a voice in matters that affect them, be consulted where appropriate, and have a right to have their say. In December 2019, the Comhairle na nÓg National Executive launched an online toolkit, Our Voices Our Schools for school management and teaching staff. This resource, which was sponsored by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (now the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY)) seeks to improve the participation of young people in decision-making in the school system.

The National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-making and Our Voices Our Schools, are both underpinned by the Lundy model of child participation (Figure 7.1) and promote a rights-based approach to involving children and young people in decision-making. The National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-making highlights how the early promotion of student voice and the participation of learners in decision-making, and in pupil/student councils can benefit learners. Such benefits can include improved engagement and attainment levels, reduced rates of early school-leaving, improved discipline and improved communication, planning and organisational skills.

---

12 *Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) (2015) National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making 2015-2020. Available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/9128db-national-strategy-on-children-and-young-peoples-participation-in-dec*

13 *Department of Health and Children (2000) Our Children - Their Lives: National Children's Strategy, 2000-2010. Available at: http://www.dcya.gov.ie/ viewdoc.asp?Docid=64&CatID=13&mn=&StartDate=01+January+2000*

The Inspectorate's approach to engagement with pupils and students during its inspection is informed by Article 12 UNCRC, the Lundy model and the National Participation Strategy.

Figure 7.1: The Lundy Model of Child Participation

The Lundy Model of Child Participation

The Lundy model interprets Article 12 UNCRC as meaning that, before anyone can express a view, they must be given opportunities to form that view. The model comprises four elements, which have a rational chronological order:

- **Space**: children must be given safe, inclusive opportunities to form and express their view
- **Voice**: children must be facilitated to express their view
- **Audience**: the view must be listened to
- **Influence**: the view must be acted on as appropriate

Source: Lundy, L. (2007) 'Voice is not enough: Conceptualizing Article 12 of the UNCRC', British Educational Research Journal, 33(6) pp.927-42

Síolta, The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and professional development for early years educators support the promotion of children's participation in early learning and care settings

Children's rights and children's participation are central to quality practice in the early learning and care (ELC) sector. The first Standard in the _Síolta_ quality framework states that Ensuring that each child's rights are met requires that she/he is enabled to exercise choice and to use initiative as an active participant and partner in her/his own development and learning. Children's active participation in choices about their daily activities are supported not only by the _National Síolta Aistear Initiative_, but by a wide range of supports for the quality of ELC.

The Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) is currently developing two types of training to support the use within ELC settings of the _National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making 2015-2020_: one for early years educators working directly with children, and another for those who will provide training for early years educators in use of the framework. The training will focus on use of the _Everyday Spaces Checklist_ in educators' work with children.

DCEDIY has also provided a capacity building grant to support implementation of the *National Framework for Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making*. This grant supports organisations to acquire resources which facilitate participation.

DCEDIY funds a number of support organisations who provide training, advice and guidance for ELC and school-age childcare (SAC) settings. Support organisations include *Better Start*, City and County Childcare Committees, and national voluntary childcare organisations. These organisations provide quality practice supports underpinned by Aistear and Síolta, including supports for ELC and SAC settings on partnership with parents and on children's participation.

Early learning and care settings and schools are making efforts to give children and young people opportunities to express their views and participate in decision-making, but to a limited extent

Early years education inspections (EYEIs) conducted during the period to which this report refers, provide examples of encouraging children to make decisions democratically, such as choosing a preferred learning activity, having freedom of movement at times during the daily routine or voting on which story to read. Findings indicate that early years educators recognised the value of giving children a choice in their play activities. However, inspection reports made references frequently to the need for settings and early years educators to provide increased opportunities and support for children to express their thoughts and ideas, and for them to engage in decision-making.

In many reports of inspections in primary and post-primary schools during this period, there was acknowledgement that pupil/student participation in decision-making was being fostered and progressed through the development of pupil/student councils.

Notwithstanding this very positive development, inspection findings during the period to which this report refers, indicated that promotion of pupil/student participation tended to be somewhat limited to a number of specific activities and initiatives. The findings also indicated that there was potential to improve the quality of pupil/student involvement in leadership in over a quarter of primary schools, and in almost a quarter of post-primary schools. Overall, there was a need to enhance and extend the opportunities for pupils/students to take on leadership roles in their schools.

A high proportion of pupils and students did not feel that they have a say in how things are done in school. Meaningful opportunities should be provided for the participation of children and young people in decision-making

The responses to surveys administered to pupils in primary and students in post-primary schools during the period to which this report refers, indicate that a high proportion of pupils and students did not feel that they had a say in how things were done in their school. Less than half (48%) of primary pupils surveyed indicated they had a say, and a significant minority (32%) reported that they did not know (Table 7.5). At post-primary level, the majority (57%) of students surveyed reported that they did not feel that they had a say in how things were done in their school, with less than a quarter (23%) feeling that they had a say (Table 7.6). While the vast majority of post-primary schools had student councils, and pupil councils were a feature of many primary schools, the extent to which pupils/students have a say in how things are done in their school is an area for further consideration and development.

These findings suggest that schools need to reflect on the extent to which the perspectives of children and young people are heard by all staff, by the school's leadership and management team, and by the board of management, and that the issues of greatest concern to them are acted upon positively and supportively. The tools provided in the DCEDIY *National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-making* (2019) will support schools and settings in planning, conducting and evaluating child and youth participation processes and initiatives effectively, and also in giving their pupils and students a greater say in decision-making within the schools and settings.

Table 7.5: Pupils have a say in how things are done in the school: WSE-MLL in Primary and Special Schools, September 2016 - December 2020

YES
47.6%
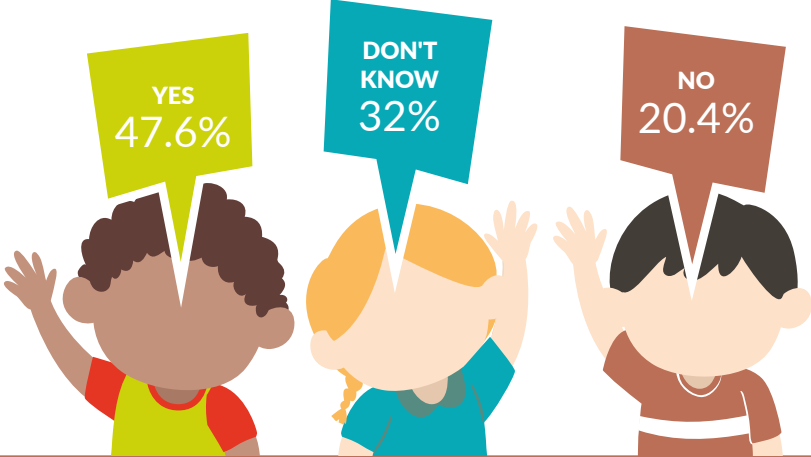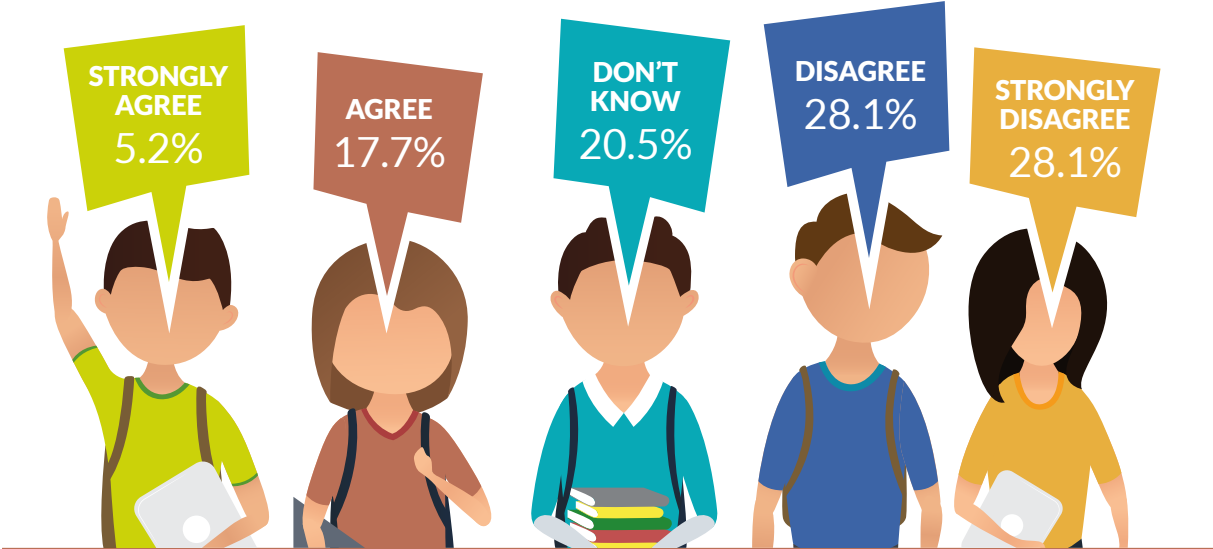
DON'T KNOW
32%

NO
20.4%

Table 7.6: Students have a say in how things are done in the school: WSE-MLL Post-primary, September 2016 - December 2020

STRONGLY AGREE
5.2%

AGREE
17.7%

DON'T KNOW
20.5%

DISAGREE
28.1%

STRONGLY DISAGREE
28.1%

7.4 THE INSPECTORATE'S PRACTICES

In the period 2016-2020, the Inspectorate took a number of steps to enhance our engagement with children and young people, and parents in inspection, and we continue to develop our practices in promoting parent voice and student voice.[14] The rights-based approach of the United Nation's Convention on the Rights of the Child, (UNCRC) (1989), to involving children and young people in decisions that affect them, and the principles of the Lundy model of participation are at the heart of the Inspectorate's work in this area.

During inspections, the Inspectorate consults with pupils and students informally and formally

During inspections, inspectors engage with children and young people about their learning and their educational experiences in the school. For example, their views are sought on those experiences, and about how they feel about school. This engagement may take place during interactions in the classroom, meetings with groups of pupils/students, or through surveys. These are important elements of how the Inspectorate elicits, listens to, and takes account of the views of children and young people. This has involved giving pupils/students information in advance of inspections to improve their 'readiness' to engage with inspectors during evaluations, and providing them with new ways to engage meaningfully with inspectors during inspections. The Inspectorate is also working on how it provides feedback to children and young people following an inspection.

The Inspectorate's student voice work aims to improve its interactions with children and young people further

Since 2015, the Inspectorate has been committed to developing its practices in relation to how it takes account of the perspectives and insights of children and young people, and how it engages and works with them in partnership. In 2018, the Inspectorate decided to enact several changes to its way of working with children and young people, and to do so by September 2022. To progress this, a student voice team was established within the Inspectorate. The aim of the team's work on student voice is to improve the Inspectorate's interactions with children and young people in ELC settings, primary and post-primary schools before, during and after inspections.

A key output of the Inspectorate's project has been the design of a methodology that explicitly includes the voice of children and young people in the work of the Inspectorate. This methodology, of which a key element is working with children and young people in advisory groups and focus groups, was developed with support from the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (now DCEDIY).

The learning from this project informed the Inspectorate's work with focus groups of students during the COVID-19 pandemic. Currently, it is also informing the Inspectorate's development of materials and processes to promote more effective engagement with children and young people before, during and after inspections. These materials include:

- a set of videos (ELC, primary and post-primary) and a picture book (ELC) about the work that inspectors do

- a compendium of children's and young people's reflections on the inspection process (primary and post-primary)

- the design of a pre-evaluation information session for students (WSE-MLL post-primary)

---

14 In this report, the term 'student voice' includes reference to children in ELC settings, pupils in primary schools, and students in post-primary schools and other educational settings.

The Inspectorate convened focus group meetings with pupils and students about their experiences of returning to school after school closures

Gathering the perspectives of pupils and students became even more important for the Inspectorate when COVID-19 impacted on their lives and education. In line with our commitment to the promotion of student voice, the Inspectorate convened focus groups with pupils and students in a small sample of primary and post-primary schools in autumn 2020, when schools reopened following the first lockdown. The purpose was to listen to, learn about and understand children's and young people's experiences since returning to school in September with a view to:

- informing policy decisions and the provision of further guidance and supports for schools, teachers, children and young people
- recognising good practice in schools through the lens of pupils' and students' experiences of being back at school.

To facilitate the widest range of views to be heard, participants in the focus groups were encouraged to share the views of their friends and classmates, where appropriate and relevant.

The focus group research yielded important findings for the participants, schools, the Inspectorate and the Department

The engagement with children and young people during the focus groups of pupils and students in the September-December 2020 period proved very beneficial. It provided very valuable insights into primary pupils' and post-primary students' experiences of the return to school, and their experiences of schoolwork and learning. During the focus groups, a key message from pupils and students was that being in school, despite restrictions owing to COVID-19, was very important in terms of their wellbeing, their socialisation and their learning. Pupils and students were very happy to be in school and articulated a new-found appreciation for the work of their school and teachers. They also indicated a very strong preference for being in school rather than trying to learn from home.

The findings identified a number of areas for schools to consider generally, and to develop further, where necessary, as they strove to ensure that teaching and learning experiences were as meaningful as possible for pupils and students in a face-to-face schooling context in pandemic times. In particular, they highlighted the importance of getting feedback on their work, and the value of collaborative and practical activity. They also emphasised the need to involve pupils/students in decisions that affect them. Students in senior cycle in post-primary schools also asked for greater autonomy to manage their work. While the number of schools, pupils and students involved in this project was small, the findings are nonetheless important for the participants themselves, for schools generally and for the Inspectorate, the Department and the public more broadly.

This work was complemented by surveys of pupils and students[15] in a sample of primary schools, post-primary schools and Youthreach centres during the lockdown of early 2021. The purpose of the research was to learn from children and young people about their experiences of remote teaching and learning during the period of school/centre closures in January and February 2021. The perspectives of the pupils and students provided valuable insights into the challenges associated with remote learning, and into their wellbeing during this exceptional time.

Inspection is placing greater emphasis on engaging with parents during inspections

During the period covered by this report, the Inspectorate has worked to improve how it involves parents in inspection processes, and to find ways of communicating inspection findings to ensure they can be clearly understood by all. We are mindful that the provision of information to parents about the quality of

---

15 *Inspectorate, Department of Education (2021) Remote Teaching and Learning: Report on a survey of pupils in primary schools, February 2021; Remote Teaching and Learning: Report on a survey of students in post-primary schools, February 2021; Remote Teaching and Learning: Report on a survey of students in Youthreach centres, February 2021.*
Available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/de987-remote-teaching-and-learning-reports/.

schools and settings can strengthen parents' voice in the education setting. To this end, we have established a parent voice project team to examine and improve the ways in which the experiences and opinions of parents are accessed, analysed and reported on. The team has also examined current practices and procedures in relation to the writing and publication of inspection reports, and how clearly report findings are communicated to parents.

Recommendations from this project will inform the development of inspection practices over the next three-year cycle of inspection work.

The Inspectorate sought the views of parents in relation to schools' provision for remote learning during COVID-19

The importance of parental views in the evaluation and inspection process was most obvious during research and evaluation work conducted during the COVID-19 lockdown periods, and in the periods in advance of, and following, school re-openings. In April 2020, the Inspectorate conducted surveys of parents of primary pupils and post-primary pupils in collaboration with the National Parents Council-Primary. At that time, schools had been closed for a period of three weeks. The purpose of the survey was to elicit parents' views on their children's experience of remote teaching and learning during the initial period of school closures. It was also designed to give an insight into how schools were engaging with their pupils and students in a difficult and unprecedented context. In addition, the survey was conducted to inform the Department's plans, actions and supports for the continuity of learning of pupils and students.

The surveys highlighted the need for all schools to consider a range of issues as they continued to ensure teaching and learning for their pupils/students in the remote teaching-and-learning environment. Areas for consideration included the provision of feedback to pupils/students on their work and maintaining regular contact with them, seeking feedback from parents, and encouraging pupils and students to be physically active during the day. At primary level, the findings highlighted the need for schools, which were not using digital technology for distance teaching and learning, to engage with the support agencies for practical advice.

In October 2020, the Inspectorate carried out a series of surveys to identify successes and challenges experienced by schools during the September to October 2020 period, when schools had reopened. The survey questions were based on four key themes: experience of school, teaching and learning, wellbeing and implementation of COVID-19 measures. To elicit the views of the key stakeholders, surveys were again administered to parents, as well as learners, principals and teachers in a sample of primary, post-primary and special schools across the country. The findings from the surveys of parents complemented those from the other stakeholders in providing a comprehensive insight into the experience of the return to school period. These are shared in Chapter 10.

***The Education (Student and Parent Charter) Bill* reflects the Department's commitment to promoting schools' engagement with students, parents and the whole school community**

In recent years, the Department has placed increased emphasis on enhancing and supporting communication with parents and students at school level. This is reflected in its commitment to the development of a Student and Parent Charter. *The Education (Student and Parent Charter) Bill*, which was published in September 2019, has been passed by the Seanad and, at the time of the publication of this report, is awaiting a date for committee stage in the Dáil. It is expected that the Bill will be re-named the *Education (School Community Charter) Bill*. The overall aim of this legislation is to improve the school community's level of engagement by inviting feedback, comment and observations from students and parents, and by further developing a listening culture in our schools. This legislation will provide greater clarity for students and their parents on what they can expect from schools, and will help ensure that schools, students and parents continue to work effectively in partnership together. Once the Bill is passed and following consultation with education stakeholders, the Minister for Education will publish charter guidelines to inform how schools will consult with, seek feedback from and respond to students and their parents. The Charter legislation and guidelines have potential to support parental engagement in school self-evaluation (SSE) in schools, and will continue to inform the Inspectorate's developmental work in engaging with parents more effectively in inspection processes.

7.5. KEY MESSAGES

Partnerships with parents

- Partnership in education is a crucial element of an effective education system. Schools, parents and communities working together in a genuinely participative way can benefit the learning and wellbeing of children and young people in our schools, ELC settings, centres for education and other education settings.

- COVID-19 has highlighted the role that effective partnership and communication between schools and families can have in supporting wellbeing and learning among children and young people.

- There is potential, across ELC settings and schools, to improve aspects of communication and to secure the benefits brought by a strong culture of collaboration and partnership.

- Inspection findings indicate that while ELC settings and schools have established effective practices for sharing information with parents, there is scope to strengthen the role of parents in school governance and decision-making.

- Parental involvement in school self-evaluation (SSE) is an evolving feature of practice. The forthcoming Education (Student and Parent Charter) legislation has potential to support parental engagement in SSE processes to better effect in schools.

Partnership with children and young people

- There is a growing awareness at national, system and setting/school levels of the importance of valuing and facilitating the voice of children and young people.

- There is a need for increased pupil/student participation in decision-making in schools. Inspection surveys indicate that a majority of pupils and students in primary and post-primary schools feel that they do not have a say in how things are done in their school.

- Surveys and focus groups conducted by the Inspectorate during the September to December 2020 period show how pupils and students can provide valuable insights into their learning; such insights are important for schools and the education system.

Parents, learners and inspection

- The meaningful engagement of learners and their parents in education is a key priority for the Inspectorate. The Inspectorate has been working to enhance parents', children's and young people's engagement before, during and after inspection.

7.6. LOOKING FORWARD

Communication with parents

- To strengthen communication practices with parents, there is a need for ELC settings to share more information about their children's learning, and a need for more regular communication about the work of primary, special and post-primary schools.

- The potential of digital technology, and our learning from the COVID-19 pandemic, should be harnessed to support effective communications and new forms of partnerships. At the same time, care is needed to ensure that restrictions, which may have been necessary during the pandemic, should not erode or impede effective relationships between schools/settings and parents in the future.

Increasing pupil/student and parent participation

- Pupil/student participation and pupil/student leadership should continue to be promoted and developed at setting and school level. The views of children and young people should be valued, and they should be enabled to have influence in their education experiences and the work of the setting/school.

- ELC settings and schools should continue to promote meaningful engagement and the participation of parents in their child's education.

- Schools should ensure that parents' views are listened to, and that parents are enabled to have influence on the work of the school, including in the context of the Education (Student and Parent Charter) Bill and the guidelines that will be developed subsequent to the enactment of this legislation.

- The Inspectorate will continue to build on its work to increase the engagement of children, young people, and parents in inspection processes.

8

Leadership and Management in Schools

8.1 INTRODUCTION

Good leadership and effective management play key roles in ensuring that schools are effective and responsive to the needs of children and young people. Leadership is often a key factor where there are significant shortcomings in educational provision in schools or education centres. This chapter outlines some key findings from inspection relating to the leadership and management of schools in the period 2016-20. It looks at the supports that have been put in place to promote effective leadership and management in schools. Leadership and management for learning in early learning and care (ELC) settings has been considered in Chapter 3.

This chapter also comments on what our experience of working with schools and their leaders, as well as the organisations and bodies involved in their management, is telling us about the sustainability of the current arrangements for the management of schools. Finally, it summarises the key messages arising from developments and inspection findings, which are intended to inform the way forward.

BACKGROUND DESCRIPTION OF CURRENT MANAGEMENT ARRANGEMENTS

In Ireland, much of the formal education system is administered through a combination of centralised Government Departments, locally-managed, state-funded providers, and recognised schools.

Recognised schools are administered through the Department of Education. There is also a limited regional layer of educational administration, managed by sixteen Education and Training Boards (ETBs). The ETBs manage approximately one-third of all post-primary schools and some primary schools, and they are also responsible for the management of Youthreach centres and a range of other provision.

The Department has a particular governance role in relation to education in schools, with the individual schools and settings governed and managed through their respective boards of management. While the Department sanctions teaching posts and pays teacher salaries, the board of management is the employer of teachers in a school.

Boards of management, which are voluntary, are established by each school's founding patron and are representative of teacher, parent, community and patron interests. The way in which governance is enacted at the local school/setting level varies across different aspects of provision. School leaders and boards of management are responsible for ensuring that the school is accountable for its work to its patron, the school community and to the Department. There is also a responsibility on individual schools to engage with parents and pupils/students in relation to the work of the school.

Traditionally, private bodies, mostly church authorities, have played a key role in the provision of education. However, there have been some significant developments in this regard in recent years, with increased numbers of multi-denominational/non-denominational schools and a new role for ETBs in the establishment of a small number of community national (primary) schools.

Context & developments

Looking at our School 2016 outlines clear, definable standards for leadership and management in schools

The Centre for School Leadership, established in 2015, continues to develop and support school leadership

The restoration of middle management posts of responsibility commenced in 2018

The Department's School Leadership Working Group continued to support the development of optimal leadership practices in schools

A shared school-governance pilot programme has been in place since 2015

The Programme for Government 2011 – 2016 proposed changes in relation to the autonomy of schools

The *Schools Reconfiguration for Diversity* process was initiated in 2017

Approximately 89% of primary schools remain under the patronage of the Catholic Church

The number of multi-denominational or inter-denominational primary schools has almost doubled since 2011

Inspections and reports

Findings from whole school evaluations	Percentage of schools where quality was good or very good	
	Primary schools and special schools	**Post-primary schools**
Governance	81%	84%
Leadership and management	85%	84%
Leadership of teaching and learning	74%	81%
Teamwork and distributed leadership	83%	81%
In-school communication	90%	82%
Strategic planning/SSE	73%	63%
Functioning of the board of management	79%	80%
School policy and procedure	79%	74%
Management of resources	89%	82%

Findings from DEIS evaluations	Percentage of schools where quality was good or very good	
	Primary schools	**Post-primary schools**
Action planning for improvement – Leadership of DEIS planning	74%	65%

Some key messages

The pace of change in the diversification of school patronage needs to be increased

Schools need to embed self-reflection and self-evaluation practices further

Alternative governance structures for State-funded schools should be pursued actively

The rationalisation of governance structures for the Children Detention Centre (CDC) and Special Care Units (SCUs) should be advanced

8.2 THE QUALITY OF LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT IN SCHOOLS

During the period to which this report refers, inspection findings highlighted the importance of leadership and management in ensuring overall setting and school effectiveness, equity, and the achievement of quality learning outcomes. Findings also identified a clear link between high-calibre leadership and positive learning outcomes and experiences for children and young people.

In primary, special and post-primary schools, the quality of governance, leadership and management is strong overall

In schools where whole-school evaluations were conducted between September 2016 and December 2020, inspectors found that the quality of governance was good or very good in 81% of primary schools and special schools, and in 84% of post-primary schools (Table 8.1). The quality of in-school leadership and management was good or very good in 85% of primary schools and special schools, with a similar finding (84%) at post-primary level. The remaining schools showed potential for improvement in these areas. The quality of governance was just satisfactory in 5.3% of primary and special schools and less than satisfactory in 13% of these schools. The quality of governance was satisfactory in 10% of post-primary schools and less than satisfactory in 6% of post-primary schools. The quality of in-school leadership and management was satisfactory in 8.9% of primary schools and special schools, and in 10% of post-primary schools. It was less than satisfactory in 6.1% of primary schools and special schools, and in 5.7% of post-primary schools.

Table 8.1: Quality of governance and in-school leadership and management whole-school evaluations in primary schools and special schools and in post-primary schools: September 2016 - December 2020

	Quality of governance[1]		Quality of in-school[1] leadership and management	
	Primary schools and special schools*	Post-primary schools	Primary schools and special schools	Post-primary schools.
Very good	38.7%	40.6%	39.2%	45.5%
Good	42.7%	43.1%	45.8%	38.8%
Satisfactory	5.3%	10.3%	8.9%	10.0%
Fair	9.3%	4.6%	4.0%	5.0%
Weak	4.0%	1.4%	2.1%	0.7%

Source: Inspectorate, Department of Education
*Only evaluated as part of whole-school evaluation (WSE) (Modified) in primary schools and special schools

---

1   The various aspects of school governance, leadership and management are outlined in *Looking at our School 2016: A Quality Framework for Primary Schools* and *Looking at our School 2016: A Quality Framework for Post-Primary Schools.*
    Available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/743565-looking-at-our-school-2016/

School leaders demonstrated good leadership in response to the challenges caused by the COVID-19 pandemic

Inspectorate research conducted in schools during the COVID-19 period gave us new insights into leadership in schools. On the sudden closure of schools in March 2020, principals and other school leaders had to grapple with a range of associated challenges, which included the provision of teaching and learning in a remote environment, effective communication with the school community, and supporting the wellbeing of pupils/students and staff. As the pandemic evolved, schools' priorities changed. To support the full reopening and safe operation of their schools, school leaders undertook the additional administrative demands of establishing protocols and routines to facilitate a safe learning and working environment, and putting arrangements in place for the delivery of the curriculum during the 2020/21 school year. Throughout the period of reopening, a shortage in the availability of substitute and other short-term contract teachers was an ongoing challenge for principals and school leaders.

Despite being beset by these unprecedented challenges, many school leaders adjusted well and demonstrated admirable leadership skills during the pandemic. As school closures progressed, school leaders' engagement with, and promotion of digital technologies played an important role in limiting the negative impact on children and young people's learning. During their engagement in the Inspectorate research, principals typically referenced the extent to which high levels of planning and preparation had contributed to the successful reopening of schools. The role of school leaders and managers in establishing and maintaining new routines and protocols under their COVID-19 implementation plan[2] resulted in a sense of order, security and calm for their school communities. The education system was also challenged to find alternative means of assessing students when Leaving Certificate written examinations were cancelled in 2020 and 2021. School leadership at post-primary level and management bodies played a key role in making Calculated Grades and Accredited Grades a reality through their co-operation and participation in the Advisory Group on Planning for State Examinations during the pandemic.

In a majority of schools, leadership of teaching and learning was effective. However, there was scope for the development of leadership of teaching and learning in a significant minority of schools

During the period to which this report refers, inspection findings indicated a clear link between high-calibre leadership and positive learning outcomes. Findings from announced inspections were broadly positive in this regard. They showed that leadership of teaching and learning was good or very good in 74% of primary schools and special schools, and in 81% of post-primary schools (Table 8.2). However, inspectors found that leadership of teaching and learning was just satisfactory in almost a fifth (19%) of primary schools and special schools, and less than satisfactory in 8% of these schools. Leadership of teaching and learning was found to be just satisfactory in 14% of post-primary schools and less than satisfactory in 6% of them.

In primary schools and special schools where in-school leadership was effective, reports from announced inspections noted that school leaders fostered a culture of high expectations for pupils. Reports also referred to the role that effective communication and collegiality played in developing and sustaining whole-school approaches to teaching and learning. In schools where scope for improvement in leadership of teaching and learning was noted, reports referenced the need for a more substantial focus on leadership of teaching and learning in the responsibilities assigned to members of the in-school management team. Examples of such responsibilities included the assignment of responsibility to individual members of the team for the development of areas such as curriculum and learning, student support and wellbeing, school improvement, leadership/management and development of staff teams.

At post-primary level, where in-school management was found to be effective, reports described how responsibilities attached to posts were reviewed regularly to meet the needs of the school. Where practice was less effective, reports noted that management teams were unable to function optimally because of a lack of clarity regarding their roles and expectations. In addition, the responsibilities attached to these roles did not always align appropriately with the evolving needs of the school. In some instances, it was evident that schools had not carried out a review of posts as provided for in *Circular 0044/2019* and *Circular 0003/2018*, which relate to leadership and management in primary schools and post-primary schools respectively.

---

2 *In accordance with the Work Safety Protocol, schools as places of work were required to implement a COVID-19 Response Plan. See https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/e1141-covid-19-response-plan-for-the-safe-and-sustainable-operation-of-primary-and-special-schools and https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/1fdbe-covid-19-response-plan-for-the-safe-and-sustainable-reopening-of-post-primary-schools/*

Table 8.2: Quality of leadership of teaching and learning in whole-school evaluations in primary schools and special schools, and in post-primary schools: September 2016 - December 2020

	Leadership of teaching and learning	
	Primary schools and special schools	Post-primary schools
Very good	34.3%	39.2%
Good	39.6%	41.6%
Satisfactory	18.5%	13.5%
Fair	5.5%	3.9%
Weak	2.1%	1.8%

Source: Inspectorate, Department of Education

Effective distributed leadership is crucial for high-quality teaching and learning

Distributed leadership may be defined as 'a deliberate process of sharing leadership behaviour so that team members, other than the head or manager, take an active lead'.[3] It involves 'mobilising leadership expertise at all levels in the school to generate more opportunities for change and to build the capacity for improvement'.[4] To support the advancement of distributed leadership in schools, Circular 0003/2018 and Circular 0044/2019 provided for a post of responsibility structure involving the establishment and facilitation of leadership teams in schools, with appropriately defined and shared responsibilities.

Research findings emphasise the clear links between distributed leadership and improvements in teaching and learning.[5] Findings from whole-school inspections in the period September 2016 to December 2020 were largely positive in relation to the quality of teamwork and distributed leadership in primary schools, special schools and post-primary schools. Of the schools inspected, it was found that in 83% of primary schools and special schools and in 81% of post-primary schools, the quality of teamwork and distributed leadership was good or very good (Table 8.3). Notwithstanding these positive findings, there is scope to build capacity in the area of distributed leadership and in the role of the in-school management team in leading teaching and learning. Inspectors found that teamwork and distributed leadership were just satisfactory in 12% of primary schools and special schools, and in 16% of post-primary schools. Teamwork and distributed leadership were found to be less than satisfactory in 5% of primary and special schools and in 4% of post-primary schools.

3   Lindon, J and Lindon, L (2012) *Leadership and early years professionalism: linking theory and practice.* UK: Hodder Education p.119
4   Harris, A. (2014) Distributed Leadership, *Teacher Magazine.*
    vailable at: https://www.teachermagazine.com/au_en/articles/distributed-leadership
5   Harris, A. (2013) Distributed leadership matters: Perspectives, practicalities, and potential. Corwin Press; Heck, R. H. and Hallinger, P. (2010) Testing a longitudinal model of distributed leadership effects on school improvement, *The leadership quarterly, 21(5): 867-885*

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the importance of teamwork and distributed leadership in managing emergency situations, planning for the reopening of schools, and managing the schools in a way that ensured their sustained operation in the September to December 2020 period. For example, Inspectorate research [6] carried out during this period highlighted the important role played by the COVID-19 aides in implementing the logistical changes required, with many principals commenting positively on the support provided by their lead worker representative.[7]

Table 8.3: Quality of teamwork and distributed leadership in whole-school evaluations primary schools and special schools, and in post-primary schools: September 2016 - December 2020

Table 8.3: Quality of teamwork and distributed leadership in whole-school evaluations primary schools and special schools, and in post-primary schools: September 2016 - December 2020

	Teamwork and distributed leadership	
	Primary schools and special schools	**Post-primary schools**
Very good	47.0%	43.4%
Good	36.2%	37.4%
Satisfactory	11.5%	15.7%
Fair	3.4%	3.6%
Weak	1.9%	0.0%

Source: Inspectorate, Department of Education

The effective management of in-school communication is a key dimension of leadership

Effective communication is an essential aspect of good leadership. Findings from inspections in primary schools and special schools, and in post-primary schools, which were undertaken in this period, were generally positive in relation to the quality of in-school communication. The quality of in-school communication was noted as good or very good in 90% of primary schools and special schools, and in 82% of post-primary schools (Table 8.4). In-school communication was found to be just satisfactory in 13% of post-primary schools and less than satisfactory in 6% of these schools.

6 During September-December 2020, the Inspectorate conducted research on how well primary, post-primary, special schools and Youthreach centres were operating in the context of the new arrangements relating to COVID-19. The suite of reports relating to this research is available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/78605-return-to-school-summary-of-research-september-december-2020/

7 In line with COVID-19 measures, all schools were required to appoint a lead worker representative. Their role is outlined in Department of Education (August 2021) COVID-19 response plan for the safe and sustainable operation of primary and special schools. Available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/e1141-covid-19-response-plan-for-the-safe-and-sustainable-operation-of-primary-and-special-schools

Table 8.4: Quality of in-school communication in whole-school evaluations in primary schools and special schools, and in post-primary schools: September 2016 - December 2020

In-school communication		
	Primary schools and special schools	**Post-primary schools**
Very good	57.9%	49.1%
Good	31.7%	32.4%
Satisfactory	5.7%	12.5%
Fair	3.0%	5.8%
Weak	1.7%	0.4%

Source: Inspectorate, Department of Education

Whole-school planning and self-evaluation processes are not embedded fully in schools

Effective school leaders articulate and demonstrate the importance of learning for the school community. They build a collaborative culture that has a clear focus on improving learning for pupils/students. School self-evaluation (SSE) is a process that can enable such a culture to flourish within a school community.

Inspection reports of primary and special schools and of post-primary schools from the period September 2016 to December 2020 indicate that schools were at different stages in their engagement with SSE. Although many schools, particularly schools participating in Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS), the action plan of the Department of Education for educational inclusion, had embraced the process as a tool for school improvement, others were at an earlier stage of effective implementation. Many reports noted that the school's engagement in SSE had a positive impact on learning, and included examples of effective leadership of this process. Where practice was found to be less effective, the potential of SSE was not being fully harnessed to promote improvement in the school.

In whole-school evaluations conducted between September 2016 and December 2020, inspectors noted that the quality of whole-school planning was good or very good in 73% of primary schools and special schools, and the quality of SSE was good or very good in 63% of post-primary schools (Table 8.5). Potential for significant improvement existed in a considerable proportion of schools: 27% of primary schools and special schools, and 37% of post-primary schools. This finding suggests that whole-school planning and self-evaluation processes had not been fully embedded in practice in many schools by the end of 2020.

Table 8.5: Quality of strategic planning/school self-evaluation (SSE) in whole-school evaluations in primary schools and special schools, and post-primary schools: September 2016 - December 2020

Strategic planning / School self-evaluation (SSE)		
	Primary schools and special schools	Post-primary schools
Very good	26.4%	25.6%
Good	47.0%	37.0%
Satisfactory	19.1%	25.6%
Fair	4.9%	8.2%
Weak	2.6%	3.6%

Effective leadership of the DEIS action-planning for improvement process is critically important in improving outcomes for pupils and students

In a forthcoming publication, the Inspectorate will present composite findings arising from DEIS evaluations conducted in primary and post-primary schools between 2017 and 2020, with a specific focus on the quality of leadership of the DEIS action planning for improvement process and its impact on teaching and learning.

According to the report on these findings, the quality of the leadership of DEIS action planning for improvement was found to be good or very good in 73% of the primary schools and in 66% of the post-primary schools evaluated.

One of the key elements of the DEIS action planning process, target setting, was good or very good in 69% of schools evaluated. Where weak or fair practice was identified in target setting, school leaders and teachers were unable to identify the initiatives that were most effective in terms of their impact on pupils/students.

The implementation of the DEIS plan was consistently strong in almost three-quarters of primary schools and two-thirds of post-primary schools. These schools had strong structures in place to support distributed leadership. School leaders ensured that plans were monitored frequently in terms of their impact on teaching and learning, and data was used effectively to evaluate progress and adjust targets or strategies as necessary. Where practice was weak or fair, there was a lack of monitoring and evaluation of interventions or programmes, and their impact on pupils'/students' progress was not being tracked in a systematic manner. Fostering and leading a culture of data-based decision-making in relation to instructional practices and the use of resources, remained a challenge in a significant number of schools.

Inspectors found that highly-effective principals used the DEIS action planning process to secure overall school improvement, which included improvements in teaching and learning, school climate and learning outcomes in their school. In these schools, the characteristics of instructional and transformational leadership were in evidence. Inspectors found that effective school leaders had a clear and shared vision for the school, held high expectations for their staff and pupils/students, and valued the strengths and talents of their staff in contributing to overall school improvement.

8.3 SUPPORTS TO PROMOTE LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT OF EARLY LEARNING AND CARE SETTINGS AND SCHOOLS

It is the ambition of all education systems to ensure that optimal leadership practices are developed and fostered in their schools. In that regard, the importance of collaboration between all of the stakeholders in developing and sustaining highly-effective leadership practices in schools is critically important. As the leadership of schools can be both challenging and complex, a comprehensive suite of supports for school leaders is available from the Department and its agencies. The Centre for School Leadership's (CSL) supports range from a pre-appointment professional postgraduate diploma in school leadership to coaching and mentoring supports for school leaders. The suite of supports also includes Misneach[8] and Forbairt[9], leadership training programmes provided by the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST). Additional leadership positions in schools in the form of Deputy Principal, Assistant Principal I (AP I) and Assistant Principal II (AP II) have also helped in this regard.

The development of quality frameworks supports a shared understanding of leadership and management standards

During the period to which this report refers, quality frameworks were developed to support leadership and management structures in schools. The _Looking at Our School 2016_ (LAOS) quality frameworks for primary and post-primary schools outline clear, definable standards for the dimension of leadership and management. The standards provide a common language and understanding with respect to leadership and management for education partners. The use of these standards enables schools to identify and work towards highly effective practice in the critical functions of leadership and management.

The establishment of the Centre for School Leadership represents a unique opportunity to develop and support school leadership

The Centre for School Leadership (CSL) is a partnership between the Department, the Irish Primary Principals' Network (IPPN), and the National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals (NAPD). The CSL is funded by the Teacher Education Section (TES) of the Department. It was established in September 2015 to lead, support, enhance and advise on high-quality programmes to develop and support school leadership, particularly principals, across primary, special and post-primary schools. As well as providing leadership training, the CSL advises the Department on policy in the area of school leadership.

Between January 2017 and December 2020, 944 principals availed of one-to-one coaching and a further 198 school leadership teams availed of team coaching. The coaching service is provided by executive coaches and funded by the Department. Experienced school principals, who have engaged in training in mentoring skills with CSL, also offer one-to-one mentoring to newly-appointed principals during the new principal's first year in the role. Between September 2016 and December 2020 a total of 1,275 new principals availed of this support. Both the coaching and the mentoring focused on developing the skillsets required to meet the standards of LAOS. By the end of December 2020, a total of 1,065 teachers had participated in the Postgraduate Diploma in School Leadership, an 18-month blended-learning programme, which is awarded jointly by the University of Limerick (UL), the National University of Ireland Galway (NUIG), and University College Dublin (UCD). This level nine postgraduate diploma aims to develop leadership skills amongst aspiring school leaders. At the time of writing, the Department is working with the CSL to ensure greater coherence in how newly-appointed school leaders are supported.

---

8   Information on the PDST Misneach Programme is available at:
    https://pdst.ie/primary/leadership/misneach (Primary) and https://www.pdst.ie/Misneach/Postprimary (Post-primary)

9   Information on the PDST Forbairt Programme is available at:
    https://pdst.ie/primary/leadership/forbairt (Primary) and https://www.pdst.ie/Forbairt/Postprimary (Post-primary)

The restoration of posts of responsibility has strengthened structures for delegation, and also for distributed and shared leadership

The *Action Plan for Education 2016-2019* included a specific action to change the leadership and middle management structures, and the functions carried out in schools by the holders of posts of responsibility. The restoration of middle-management posts of responsibility in schools was commenced in 2018. *Circular 0070/2018* (primary) and *Circular 0003/2018* (post-primary) introduced a number of measures which were intended to strengthen leadership and management structures. These included the setting out of a leadership and management framework for posts of responsibility.

The implementation of the leadership and management circular strengthened structures for the delegation of roles and responsibilities to meet the evolving needs and priorities of schools. Together with the *Looking at Our School 2016* framework and the SSE process, it empowered school leaders to examine and review current practice, take collective/shared responsibility, focus on teaching and learning, set improvement targets and implement and monitor actions for improvement. Taken together, these reforms provided an opportunity to shape leadership in new ways that best reflected good practice and addressed the needs of schools.

The School Leadership Working Group is working to ensure that optimal leadership practices are developed and fostered in schools

Since 2014, the Department has been focusing in an in-depth way on the issue of governance, leadership and management arrangements in schools. It has established a School Leadership Working Group (SLWG), comprising principal officers from a range of sections within the Department, which meets school leadership organisations and school management bodies regularly. The focus of the SLWG is on working to ensure optimal leadership practices are developed and fostered in our schools, and preparing proposals relating to school leadership for consideration by the Department's Management Board.

Much of the focus of the engagement between school leadership organisations and the SLWG has been on the extent of the burden of the principal's role, despite the investment in restoring middle leadership posts and the increased powers to delegate roles and responsibilities across middle leaders. In that regard, it is incumbent on the system as a whole to ensure that what has been provided to date is working effectively. This is particularly so, given the Department's considerable investment in supporting school leadership.

8.4 GOVERNANCE AND MANAGEMENT STRUCTURES IN SCHOOLS

8.4.1 CURRENT GOVERNANCE STRUCTURES IN SCHOOLS

Under the _Education Act 1998_, the patron of a school must, where practicable, appoint a board of management which manages the school at local level. To ensure that a recognised school is managed in a spirit of partnership, the board must be representative of teacher, parent, community and patron interests. The foremost goal of a board of management is to ensure that the school is managed in a manner that provides all learners with the best possible education.

The board manages the school on behalf of the patron and is accountable to the patron and the Minister. The principal is responsible for the day-to-day management of the school, including the guidance and direction of the teachers and other staff of the school. In primary, special and post-primary schools, each board of management operates as a separate legal entity and must manage its own school in accordance with the duties and functions of a board of management as set out in the _Education Act 1998_, and in accordance with the provisions of the _Governance Manual for Primary Schools 2019-2023_ and articles of management as appropriate.

In community national schools (CNS), the ETB has overall responsibility for governance. Every CNS has a board of management with responsibility for overall strategic planning and policy development for the school. As with other schools, the board includes representation from parents, teachers, the community, the patron and the principal.

8.4.2 THE QUALITY OF GOVERNANCE IN SCHOOLS

Effective boards were found to be well informed, communicated effectively, and demonstrated a clear commitment to improving the quality of provision for learners. However, there is scope to develop the work of a significant minority of boards.

The functioning of the board of management was good or very good in 79% of primary schools and special schools, and in 80% of post-primary schools inspected between September 2016 and December 2020 (Table 8.6). Potential for improvement was evident in the remaining 21% of primary schools and special schools, and 20% of post-primary schools.

In primary schools, special schools and post-primary schools, where management structures were reported by inspectors to be effective, the roles of board members were clearly defined and responsibilities were fulfilled effectively and diligently. Board members demonstrated a wide range of expertise and good commitment to enhancing and improving the quality of education provided. Members were also well informed of school practices, policies and learner attainment.

Where potential for improvement was noted, boards were typically advised to consider whole-school teaching, learning, and matters relating to learner achievement on a more regular basis. Other recommendations referred to the need to strengthen communication with stakeholders, particularly parents, regarding planning and the development of priorities, and the need to ensure that all aspects of policy and practice were in full compliance with relevant circulars, legislation and guidance documents. The forthcoming _Education (Charter) Bill_, and associated guidance, will be welcome in this regard as its main aim is to improve how schools engage with students and their parents.

Table 8.6: Quality of the functioning of the board of management in whole-school evaluations in primary schools and special schools and in post-primary schools: September 2016 - December 2020

Functioning of the board of management		
	Primary and Special	**Post-primary**
Very good	44.0%	37.0%
Good	34.7%	43.1%
Satisfactory	9.3%	13.5%
Fair	8.0%	5.3%
Weak	4.0%	1.1%

Source: Inspectorate, Department of Education
*Only evaluated as part of WSE (Mod) in primary schools and in special schools

Inspection findings indicated that aspects of school policy and procedure require development

In order to function effectively, it is necessary for schools to have clear policies and procedures in place to guide day-to-day processes. The _Education Act 1998_ specifies that it is the responsibility of each board of management to arrange for the preparation of a school plan and to ensure that it is reviewed regularly and updated.

School policies and procedures were considered to be implemented effectively in 79% of the primary schools and special schools and in 74% of the post-primary schools visited during whole-school evaluations in the period from September 2016 to December 2020 (Table 8.7). Practice in this area was considered to be less than good in the remaining 21% of primary schools and 26% of post-primary schools. In inspection reports during this period, the most frequent recommendations related to the timely review and/or ratification of policies, and the need to ensure that all aspects of policy and practice were fully in compliance with relevant Department circulars.

Table 8.7: Quality of school policy and procedures in whole-school evaluations in primary schools and special schools and in post-primary schools: September 2016 - December 2020

School Policy / Procedure		
	Primary schools and special schools	**Post-primary schools**
Very good	38.1%	34.9 %
Good	41.1%	39.1%
Satisfactory	14.9%	18.5%
Fair	4.9%	7.5%
Weak	1.0%	0.0%

Source: Inspectorate, Department of Education

Boards were successful in their implementation of COVID-19 response plans

During COVID-19, all schools and centres for education were required to have a COVID-19 response plan. Responsibility for developing, updating and implementing the plan and the associated infection prevention and control measures lay primarily with the board/ETB and school management. Their success in delivering this was evidenced in the positive findings of the supporting the safe provision of schooling (SSPS) visits conducted by the Inspectorate.

Resources were managed effectively in most schools

Together with the principal, each board of management is required to monitor the allocation of budgets, personnel, and other resources to ensure that they are aligned closely with identified learning priorities and the school's strategic plan. In whole school evaluations undertaken in primary schools and special schools during the period September 2016 to December 2020, the management of resources[10] was considered to be good or very good in 89% of schools (Table 8.8). In the remaining 11% of schools, potential for improvement was noted, including 9% of schools where practice was just satisfactory. A similar finding emerged at post-primary level where the management of resources was found to be good or very good in 82% of schools. The remaining 18% of schools showed scope for improvement, including 14% of schools where practice was just satisfactory.

Table 8.8: Quality of the management of resources in whole-school evaluations in primary schools and special schools and in post-primary schools: September 2016 - December 2020

Management of resources		
	Primary and special schools	**Post-primary**
Very good	50.0%	43.8%
Good	38.7%	38.4%
Satisfactory	8.5%	13.9%
Fair	2.8%	3.9%
Weak	0.0%	0.0%

Source: Inspectorate, Department of Education

---

10 *The evaluation of the management of resources by inspectors is informed by the following standard relating to the leadership and management domain in Looking at our School 2016: A Quality Framework for Primary Schools and Looking at Our School 2016: A Quality Framework for Post-Primary Schools: 'The board of management and the principal manage the school's human, physical and financial resources so as to create and maintain a learning organisation'*

8.4.3 OVERSIGHT OF TEACHING AND LEARNING

The Inspectorate engaged with management bodies and boards regarding governance and oversight of teaching and learning

The Inspectorate has engaged with management bodies and with boards of management regarding governance and their oversight of teaching and learning. Information arising from inspections, but predominantly from DEIS inspections, suggests that many boards require additional supports to discharge their oversight of teaching and learning in schools. In that regard, the Inspectorate has commenced engagement with a number of ETBs to provide inputs to clusters of boards of management on how to oversee the DEIS action planning for improvement process. It is expected that this engagement will continue and expand to working with other management bodies at both primary and post-primary levels.

The Inspectorate also engages with management bodies and professional leadership organisations as part of its work on the Department's School Leadership Working Group (SLWG) which is described in Section 8.3.4 of this chapter.

8.4.4 SUSTAINABILITY OF GOVERNANCE STRUCTURES

Because of their voluntary nature, boards might not be adequately equipped for their significant responsibilities

Boards of management have significant responsibilities in spite of their voluntary nature. However, there is evidence that voluntary boards might not be adequately equipped to carry out the range of responsibilities that are essential to the management of a modern school. Changes in employment law, financial management, health and safety regulations, revised child protection procedures, and the lack of growth in capitation funding are placing additional burdens on boards. It can be difficult for board members to dedicate sufficient time to deal with the range of tasks in their role. A number of measures have been put in place to address some of the issues faced by boards, including the provision of training by patrons and management bodies which is supported by funding from the Department.

The voluntary nature of school governance arrangements is not sustainable

All members of boards of management, with the exception of the principal, serve in a voluntary capacity. This tradition of volunteerism and civic contribution is a critical component in the day-to-day running of schools. However, as highlighted in the previous *Chief Inspector's Report* (2016), there remains a need for reflection and planning at Department level to provide a more sustainable form of school management, particularly in the context of an evolving regulatory and policy environment that is leading to an increased complexity in the management of schools and an associated increase in the responsibilities on boards. In this regard, the Primary Education Forum, comprising all primary education partners, was established in September 2018 to support the planning and sequencing of change in the primary school sector. The forum provides a valuable opportunity for consultation on how existing governance arrangements might be further developed.

Alternative governance structures for schools are being piloted

A shared governance structure pilot project has been in place for primary schools since 2015. This pilot project allows two schools that are under the same patronage to operate a shared governance arrangement, subject to the agreement of the patron. The benefit of a shared governance arrangement is that the same group of people manage issues that arise in both schools in a consistent manner. It is also of particular benefit to small school communities where it may be difficult to find sufficient numbers of nominees to take on the significant responsibilities associated with board membership. During the four-year term from November 2019 to November 2023, schools may continue to operate this arrangement on a voluntary and pilot basis. However, during the period of this report, very few schools availed of shared governance.

To provide for more sustainable school management, smaller schools should be encouraged to establish shared governance arrangements. Other alternative approaches to the current management of schools should also be piloted, and the resultant implications for the system be considered carefully by the Department and by the various education partners.

Recommendations for the rationalisation of governance structures for schools attached to the children detention centre and special care units have not been advanced

The previous *Chief Inspector's Report* (2016), highlighted similarities between the cohort of students attending the children detention centre (CDC) and special care units (SCUs), and students in Youth Encounter Projects (YEP) and Youthreach Centres. It noted that these schools required a more effective governance and management structure. It also identified the need for any future rationalisation of the management structures of the CDC and SCUs to include the YEP schools, and to also consider the inclusion of Youthreach Centres.

These recommendations in the Chief Inspector's report were not progressed during the period to which this report refers. However, a number of schools attached to the CDC or SCUs came under the auspices of local ETBs which also had a governance role for Youthreach Centres. It is hoped that these revised governance arrangements will contribute to the necessary rationalisation of management structures in these schools.

8.4.5 SCHOOL AUTONOMY

Some elements of the changes in respect of school autonomy, envisaged in the *Programme for Government 2011-2016,* were addressed

The *Programme for Government 2011-2016* proposed changes to the autonomy of schools[11] in aspects of ethos, governance, staffing, budget and curriculum. The period to which this report refers saw some progress in addressing these changes.

A key development in respect of school autonomy allowed parental and guardian preference to play an increasingly significant role in determining the patronage of new primary and post-primary schools, where these schools are required for demographic reasons. In such instances, parental preference, along with an analysis of existing provision in the relevant areas, inform decisions on the patronage of the new schools. An *Online Patronage Process System* (OPPS) was developed in 2018 to allow parents to have access to objective information on all patronage options available for new schools. The schools' reconfiguration for diversity process, which seeks to transfer existing schools from denominational to multi-denominational patrons in response to the wishes of local families, is aimed at accelerating the delivery of multi-denominational schools across the country and providing greater choice for parents, particularly in areas where new schools are unlikely to be established.

The introduction of the Special Education Teaching Allocation model in *primary* and *post-primary* schools in January 2017 was significant in advancing school autonomy. This new model allocated teachers to schools on the basis of the profiled educational needs of each school. One of the key principles which underpins the model is that the child with the greatest level of need should receive the greatest level of support in the school. In that regard, the removal of the requirement for a formal diagnosis enables schools to allocate their resources taking account of this principle. Aligned with this autonomy was an increased responsibility on boards of management to ensure that timetabling and other practices were consistent with the terms of Department circulars governing practice in this area.

The autonomy afforded to schools through their engagement with the Schools Excellence Fund (SEF) represented a further move towards greater autonomy. This initiative, introduced in 2017, was initially targeted primarily at schools participating in the DEIS initiative. This was the first time that schools were funded to work together on innovative solutions to locally-identified challenges and given the freedom to experiment with new teaching approaches and ways of working. The SEF enables school leaders to collaborate on ideas based on their local experience and unique perspective.

Curriculum redevelopment during this time promoted the concepts of teacher autonomy and agency, encouraged enhanced learner agency[12], and placed an increased emphasis on innovation and independent learning. Greater autonomy and support for practitioners and teachers were also evident in the development of new curriculum specifications, such as the *Primary Language Curriculum* and new specifications for a range of Junior Cycle subjects, and the growth of online curriculum toolkits.

---

11 School autonomy involves the decentralising of decision-making to schools. Increasing the autonomy of schools generally involves giving greater decision-making to schools. It can enable schools to make their own decisions about aspects of their operation and work. It can also involve parents, patrons, communities, or a combination of all of these, having a greater say in the operation and work of schools. (Department of Education and Skills (2015) Advancing School Autonomy in the Irish School System

12 Learner agency refers to the feeling of ownership and control that learners have over their own learning

8.6 PATRONAGE

Although the education system is state funded, the majority of schools are owned and managed by private organisations. The Department sanctions teaching posts and pays teacher salaries, whereas the board of management is the employer of teachers in a school.

There is a range of patronage models in operation

While the State provides for free primary and post-primary education, schools are established by patron bodies who define the ethos of the school and appoint the board of management to run the school on a day-to-day basis. The patron's responsibilities are set out in law under the _Education Act 1998_. There is a range of patronage models in operation in primary and special schools and in post-primary schools.

At primary school level, the Department of Education currently classifies schools as denominational, inter-denominational and multi-denominational, offering education through the medium of English or Irish.

Figure 8.1: Models of School Patronage

Denominational

- A denominational school is under the patronage of a single religious community

Inter-Denominational

- An inter-denominational school is under the patronage or trusteeship of more than one religious faith community

Multi-Denominational

Two types of primary schools are categorised as multi-denominational:

- Schools that do not provide religious education as formation, during the school day, but do provide education about religions and beliefs
- Schools that provide education about religions and also provide some faith formation for different denominations

Within the above models of school patronage, there are four models of post-primary provision: Voluntary Secondary, Vocational (including Community Colleges), Community schools and Comprehensive schools, all of which are funded by the Department. Within the four categories, there is a degree of variation as particular school types have been adapted to meet local circumstances, for example, in order to meet the religious composition of a particular community.

VOLUNTARY SECONDARY SCHOOLS

Voluntary secondary schools are privately owned and managed, usually under the patronage of an individual body, such as a religious community, a charitable trust or a private charitable company. These schools are increasingly governed by lay school trusts (which have taken over from religious orders).

VOCATIONAL SCHOOLS
(INCLUDING COMMUNITY COLLEGES)

Vocational schools are administered by Education and Training Boards (ETBs). There are two groupings of schools in the ETB sector: traditional vocational schools which are non-denominational in their governance structures and designated community colleges which are an adaptation of the traditional vocational school having emerged in the 1960s as part of the Government's aim of providing universal second-level education.

COMPREHENSIVE SCHOOLS

Comprehensive schools are managed by a board of management representative of the relevant religious authority, the local ETB and the Minister for Education. The board is appointed by the Minister.

COMMUNITY SCHOOLS

Community schools are managed by boards of management representative of local interests. In the case of community schools, trustees hold the property in trust for the Minister and are deemed to be the patron under the Education Act.

Most schools are under the patronage of religious denominations

The vast majority of primary schools in Ireland are owned by, and under the patronage of, religious denominations. In 2020, 94% of the 3,102 primary schools were denominational, and 89% were under the patronage of the Catholic Church (Table 8.9). At post-primary level, voluntary secondary schools, community schools and comprehensive schools are generally denominational, and vocational schools and community colleges are inter-denominational. In 2020, 50% of the 730 post-primary schools were denominational, (47% Catholic and 3% Protestant) and 49% were multi-denominational (Table 8.10).

Table 8.9: Mainstream primary schools by ethos, 2016-2020

	Catholic	Church of Ireland	Multi-Denominational/ Inter-denominational[13]	Other	Total
2020	2,756	171	159	21	3,107
2019	2,760	172	153	21	3,106
2018	2,776	173	136	21	3,106
2017	2,785	174	132	20	3,111
2016	2,794	175	126	20	3,115

Source: Statistics Section, Department of Education

Table 8.10: Mainstream post-primary schools by ethos: 2016-2020

	Catholic	Church of Ireland	Multi-Denominational/ Inter-denominational[14]	Other	Total
2020	344	22	359	5	730
2019	344	22	352	5	723
2018	346	22	349	5	722
2017	345	23	343	4	715
2016	344	23	340	4	711

Source: Statistics Section, Department of Education

The schools' reconfiguration for diversity process is changing the profile of the patronage of schools

In recent years, society has changed rapidly and it now includes families of many different nationalities, religions and beliefs. Education legislation has also evolved. With the commencement of certain sections of the *Education (Admissions to Schools) Act 2018*, since October 2018, primary schools are prohibited from using religion as a selection criterion in school admissions. However, as also outlined in the Act and in *Circular 0007/2020*, there are protections in this provision to ensure that a child of a minority faith can still access a school of their own faith.

13 One non-denominational school is included in the data for multi/inter-denominational primary schools
14 One non-denominational school is included in the data for multi/inter-denominational post-primary schools.

While schools (denominational, multi-denominational and inter-denominational) welcome children and young people of all beliefs and none, it is evident that increased diversity of patronage is required to respond fully to the changing needs of society.
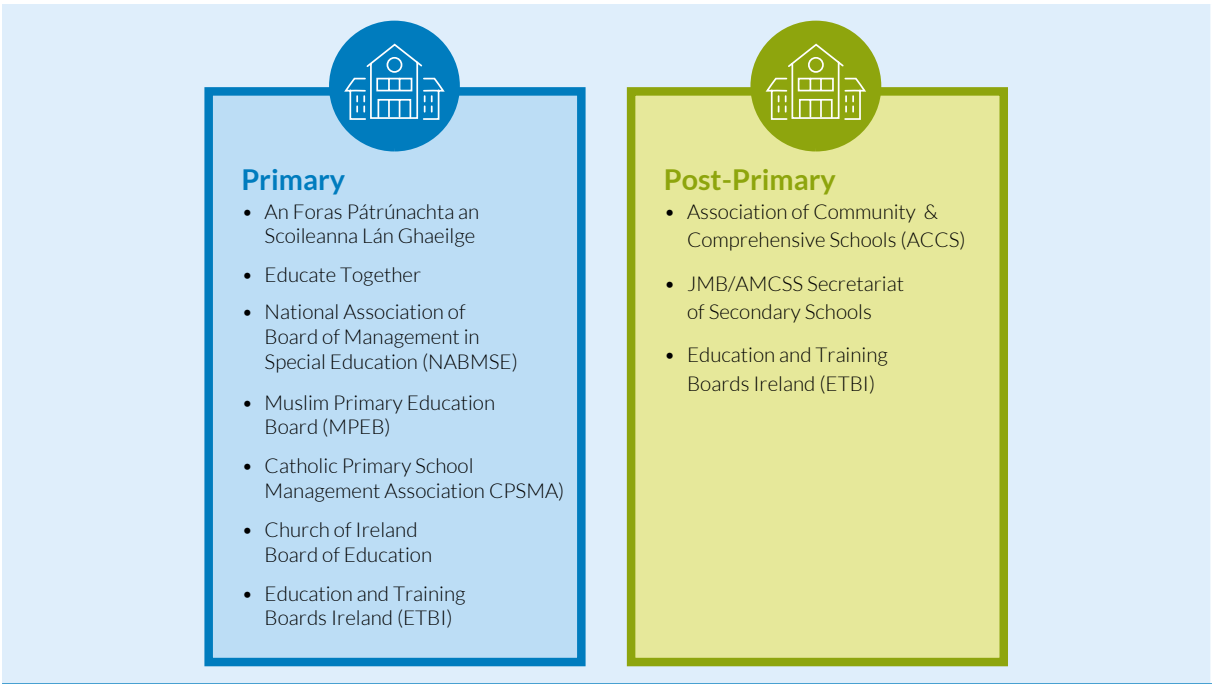
The schools' reconfiguration for diversity process was initiated in 2017 by the Government to provide more multi-denominational schools. To improve parental choice, the Government has committed to achieving the target of at least 400 multi-denominational primary schools by 2030. While new schools will account for a certain amount of this provision, transfers of existing schools from religious patronage are also required to achieve that target. There is evidence that progress has been made. The number of multi-denominational or inter-denominational primary schools almost doubled from 85 in 2011[15] to 159 (out of a total of 3107) in 2020 (Table 8.9). Of the 730 post-primary schools in 2020, almost half (359 in total) were multi-denominational or inter-denominational (Table 8.10).

To cater for all the different traditions and religions from which pupils/students come, it is evident that the school patronage system needs to continue to evolve.

8.6 MANAGEMENT BODIES

A range of national management bodies is in place across the primary and post-primary sectors to provide information, advice, support, and resource material to the members of the board of management in the schools under their umbrella. The management bodies listed in Figure 8.3 typically support the management of schools on the basis of ethos, relating to either religion or language.

Figure 8.2: Management bodies

Primary
- An Foras Pátrúnachta an Scoileanna Lán Ghaeilge
- Educate Together
- National Association of Board of Management in Special Education (NABMSE)
- Muslim Primary Education Board (MPEB)
- Catholic Primary School Management Association CPSMA)
- Church of Ireland Board of Education
- Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI)

Post-Primary
- Association of Community & Comprehensive Schools (ACCS)
- JMB/AMCSS Secretariat of Secondary Schools
- Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI)

In addition to the management bodies mentioned in Table 8.2, a number of other organisations provide support to the management and leadership of schools. These include professional bodies for principals and deputy principals such as the Irish Primary Principals' Network (IPPN) and the National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals (NAPD) as well as organisations such as An Chomhairle Um Oideachas Gaeltachta agus Gaelscolaíochta agus Gaeloideachas which provide support for the Gaeltacht and Irish-medium education sector.

In recognition of the responsibility that the _Education Act 1998_ has imposed on boards of management and the increasingly complex environment in which they must operate, the Department provides funding to school management bodies for the training and development of boards of management. Each management body organises and delivers training to the boards of management of the schools that they represent. The five core modules comprise:

- The Board as a Corporate Entity
- Employment Law
- Financial Management
- Legal Issues
- Child Protection Guidelines.

The Five Core Modules

THE BOARD AS A CORPORATE ENTITY

EMPLOYMENT LAW

FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT

LEGAL ISSUES

CHILD PROTECTION GUIDELINES

8.7 KEY MESSAGES

- There was a gradual change in profile of the patronage of primary and post-primary schools between September 2016 and December 2020; the voluntary nature of boards of management continued to create challenges.

- Inspection findings show that clear communication practices and strong cultures of collaboration lie at the heart of effective schools, but they need further development in a minority of schools.

- Self-reflection and self-evaluation practices have evolved; systematic approaches are not yet fully established or embedded in many schools and settings across all sectors.

- Effective leaders and managers communicate well and demonstrate a strong commitment to improving the quality of provision for learners.

8.8 LOOKING FORWARD

- Increased pace in diversifying school patronage is required to respond fully to the changing needs of society and a demand for educational provision that is not denominational.

- Alternative governance structures for state-funded schools should be pursued actively with the aim of providing schools with more efficient and systematic supports. The rationalisation of governance structures for children detention centres (CDCs), and special care units (SCUs) should be advanced.

- The Primary Education Forum offers a valuable opportunity for consultation on how existing governance arrangements for schools might be better achieved and developed.

- Those in leadership and management positions in settings and schools, particularly primary schools, need to place a more substantial focus on the leadership of teaching and learning.

- Building on the responsiveness of school leaders and the collaboration across the system to ensure sustained provision of education during the pandemic, there is potential to develop leadership, collaboration, and self-evaluation within and across schools further.

9

Implementation of national priorities in primary and post-primary education

9.1. INTRODUCTION

Over the period to which this report refers, the Department made major investments in the education sector to improve outcomes for children and young people, to break cycles of disadvantage, to support teachers, and to ensure continuous improvement in schools. This chapter describes key Department initiatives that are linked to the following national priority areas for primary and post-primary education: child protection, Gaeltacht education, Irish-medium education outside the Gaeltacht, Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM), digital learning, creativity, education for sustainable development, modern foreign languages and wellbeing, all of which became a particular focus in education during the period September 2016 to December 2020. The COVID-19 pandemic impacted on their implementation during 2020; some were prioritised while others were delayed. This chapter presents a summary of key findings in relation to these priority areas, especially as they relate to primary and post-primary education. In instances where their implementation was delayed, it has not been feasible to evaluate their outcomes as yet.

9.2. CHILD PROTECTION

There have been considerable advances in the Inspectorate's monitoring of child protection practice and procedures in schools

Under the _Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-primary Schools 2017_, the Inspectorate is required to monitor and report on schools' compliance with these procedures. The Inspectorate's monitoring work in this regard is one of a range of quality assurance and oversight measures to ensure that schools and their staff are operating in compliance with the _Children First Act 2015_. The 2017 Procedures are also designed to provide guidance and direction to school personnel and school authorities in relation to meeting their obligations under the Children First Act 2015 and in the continued implementation of the best practice, non-statutory guidance set out in _Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children_ (2017).

Context & developments

- *Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools published in 2017*

Gaeltacht education
- €13.9m allocated to support the implementation of the Policy on Gaeltacht Education 2017-2020, published in October 2016

- 134 schools participating in the Gaeltacht School Recognition Scheme; Evaluation of programme underway
- Online e-Hub Pilot Project launched in April 2019; Findings published in March 2021
- Four-year Irish-medium programme for primary teachers commenced in 2019
- Three-year pilot in content and language integrated learning (CLIL) launched in April 2019

- STEM Education Policy Statement (and associated implementation plan) published in 2017
- Evaluation of the first phase of implementation conducted by the Inspectorate in 2019

- Digital Strategy for Schools 2015 – 2020

- All-of-government focus on creativity through the *Creative Ireland Programme*
- Action plan, developed in 2019, for Inspectorate's engagement with Creativity from 2020 to 2022

- *Languages Connect: Ireland's Strategy for Foreign Languages in Education 2017 – 2026 and Implementation Plan 2017 – 2022* published in 2017
- *Modern Foreign Languages: A Report on the Quality of Practice in Post-Primary Schools* published by the Inspectorate in 2020

- *Implementation of National Strategy on Education for Sustainable Development 2014 – 2020 continued*

- *Education for Sustainable Development: A study of opportunities and linkages in early childhood, primary and post-primary curriculum* published by NCCA in 2018

- *Report on the Review of Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE)* published by the NCCA in 2019

- *Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice (2018 – 2023)* published in July 2018

- *The COVID-19 pandemic impacted on the implementation of national priorities during 2020*

Inspection, evaluation and advisory activity

- Child Protection Monitoring

Percentage of inspections in which full compliance was achieved with child protection checks		
	Primary and special schools	**Post-primary schools**
Level 1 checks	89%	92%
Level 2 checks	87%	77%

- There were high levels of compliance with child protection checks (level 3) during CPSIs. Schools made significant efforts to address any areas of non-compliance
- Gaeltacht Education Policy
  o 526 advisory visits to schools participating in the Gaeltacht School Recognition Scheme

Some key messages

| The Department should revise expectations around the pace and nature of reforms | Schools should ensure full compliance with record-keeping procedures related to child protection | The system needs to build on the progress made during the COVID-19 pandemic in harnessing the potential of digital technology | A more integrated approach to SPHE from primary through to Senior Cycle should be pursued in Social Personal and Health Education |

As part of the Department's oversight measures, the Inspectorate checks on compliance with the key aspects of the Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools 2017 during all school inspections. The level of checks on compliance depends on the inspection being conducted:

Level 1 Checks

are undertaken in the course of incidental inspections, curriculum evaluations, subject inspections, programme evaluations, evaluation of provision for pupils/students with special educational needs, follow-through inspections and supporting the safe provision of schooling (SSPS) inspections. There are three checks undertaken at level 1 and they relate primarily to the correct display of core documentation and the awareness among staff visited of their responsibilities as mandated persons (Table 9.1). Level 1 checks were carried out in 3,641 schools (2083 primary and special; 1558 post-primary) in the period September 2016 to December 2020.

Level 2 Checks

are undertaken in the course of whole-school evaluations (WSE), whole-school evaluations – management of leadership and learning (WSE-MLLs), evaluation of action planning for improvement in DEIS[1] Schools, evaluation of centres for education (Youthreach) and evaluation of schools attached to special care units. There are eight checks undertaken at level 2, which include the three checks undertaken at level 1. The additional five checks at level 2 look in greater detail at aspects of the 2017 procedures; these include the provision of an oversight report to the board, the school's planning for Social Personal and Health Education (SPHE), Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) and the Stay Safe Programme and the secure storage of child protection records (Table 9.1). Level 2 checks were carried out in 877 schools (520 primary and special; 357 post-primary) in the period September 2016 to December 2020.

Level 3 Checks

are undertaken in the course of a child protection and safeguarding inspection (CPSI). The Inspectorate introduced this model of inspection in January of 2019 to focus in an in-depth way on schools' compliance with the procedures. It was introduced following an unprecedented level of consultation with the education partners, as well as a detailed consultation and research phase in schools. The CPSI process in an individual school consists of two inspections: an initial CPSI and a final CPSI. The two inspections are typically conducted within a four to six-week period in an individual school. The full set of level three checks is presented in Table 9.2. During 2019 and 2020, initial CPSIs were conducted in 32 primary and special schools and 26 post-primary schools. By the end of 2020, final CPSIs had been conducted in 17 of those primary and special schools and 17 of those post-primary schools.

If a school is not compliant with any aspect of child protection procedures, the Inspectorate continues to engage with the school until the school becomes compliant. Should the inspection model result in a published report, the school's compliance with the checks conducted during the inspection is always reported on in the published report.

1   Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) is the Department's action plan for educational inclusion.

Table 9.1: Level 1 and level 2 child protection checks

Check	Level 1	Level 2
The name of the Designated Liaison Person (DLP) and the Child Safeguarding Statement are prominently displayed near the main entrance to the school.	✓	✓
The Child Safeguarding Statement has been ratified by the board and includes an annual review and a risk assessment.	✓	✓
All teachers visited reported that they have read the Child Safeguarding Statement and that they are aware of their responsibilities as mandated persons.	✓	✓
The Child Safeguarding Statement meets the requirements of the *Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools 2017*.		✓
The records of the last three board of management meetings record a child protection oversight report that meet the requirements of the *Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary schools 2017*.		✓
The board of management has ensured that arrangements are in place to provide information to all school personnel on the *Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools, 2017*.		✓
School planning documentation indicates that the school is making full provision for the relevant aspects of the curriculum (SPHE, Stay Safe, RSE, and Wellbeing).		✓
Child protection records are maintained in a secure location.		✓

Source: Inspectorate, Department of Education

Table 9.2: Level 3 child protection checks

Check	
Check 1	The school has communicated the required aspects of the *Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools 2017* to relevant stakeholders.
Check 2	A Designated Liaison Person (DLP) and a deputy DLP have been appointed in line with the requirements of the *Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools 2017*.
Check 3	The board of management reports that it is aware of and discharges its responsibilities to provide information to all school personnel relevant to child protection and to ensure that available training is undertaken by all or some members of staff as required.
Check 4	The board of management reports that it is aware of its responsibilities in relation to vetting of all school personnel and report that they discharge these responsibilities.
Check 5	A child safeguarding statement and risk assessment have been prepared in line with the template and requirements of the *Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools 2017*.
Check 6	The minutes of the board meetings that were checked contained a record of a child protection oversight report being provided in line with the requirements of the *Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools 2017*.
Check 7	Correct record keeping procedures were found in the child protection cases examined.
Check 8	The procedures to report child protection concerns were implemented in the records examined.
Check 9	The procedures to report allegations or suspicions of abuse against school personnel were implemented in the records examined.
Check 10	The quality of planning for and implementation of the SPHE curriculum* and the Stay Safe programme in primary schools and of the SPHE curriculum and the RSE programme in post-primary schools, as evident during the inspection.

Source: Inspectorate, Department of Education
* RSE is a key component of the SPHE curriculum in primary schools

Overall compliance with level 1 and level 2 child protection checks was high; issues of non-compliance were addressed through follow-up engagements with the schools involved

In order to be fully compliant, a school must be compliant with all of the checks carried out during an inspection. As can be seen from Table 9.3, while there was a high level of compliance with level 1 and level 2 checks, it is notable that almost a quarter (24%) of post-primary schools were found to be non-compliant with at least one of the level 2 checks. All issues of non-compliance were addressed through follow-up engagements with the schools involved.

Table 9.3: Compliance with level 1 and level 2 child protection checks: September 2016 to December 2020

	Level 1		Level 2	
	Fully compliant	**Not fully compliant**	**Fully compliant**	**Not fully compliant**
Primary and special schools	89.3%	10.7%	87.3%	12.7%
Post-primary schools	92.1%	7.9%	76.5%	23.5%

Source: Inspectorate, Department of Education

In general, there were high levels of compliance evident during child protection and safeguarding inspections, and schools made substantial efforts to address any issues of non-compliance

As part of the CPSI model, two separate inspections are undertaken in the school by a team of two inspectors. During each inspection, they carry out the ten checks outlined in the published guide. For checks one to nine, inspectors use the following scale to describe the school's level of compliance: fully compliant, substantially compliant, partially compliant or not compliant. As can be seen from Table 9.4, there were high levels of compliance with most of the checks during the 58 initial CPSIs conducted during 2019 and 2020.

Table 9.4: Findings from checks 1 – 9 conducted during initial CPSIs in 2019 and 2020[1]

	Fully compliant	Substantially compliant	Partially compliant	Not compliant
Check 1	74.1%	22.4%	3.4%	0.0%
Check 2	98.3%	1.7%	0.0%	0.0%
Check 3	65.5%	27.6%	5.2%	1.7%
Check 4	94.8%	1.7%	3.4%	0.0%
Check 5	79.3%	20.7%	0.0%	0.0%
Check 6	36.2%	34.4%	19.0%	10.3%
Check 7	19.2%	46.2%	34.6%	0.0%
Check 8	33.3%	33.3%	29.4%	3.9%
Check 9	54.5%	9.1%	36.4%	0.0%

Percentage figures are based on instances where the check was applicable
Source: Inspectorate, Department of Education

Table 9.5: Findings from check 10 conducted during initial CPSIs in 2019 and 2020[1]

	Very good	Good	Satisfactory	Fair	Weak
Check 10	36.2%	37.9%	15.5%	10.3%	0.0%

Source: Inspectorate, Department of Education

While not all of the schools inspected had had their final CPSI by the end of 2020, the findings from the final CPSIs conducted indicated that schools had made significant efforts to address the areas of non-compliance that had been identified in the initial CPSI. In almost all cases, full compliance was achieved (Table 9.6). In cases where a school was less than fully compliant with a particular child protection requirement following their final CPSI, the Inspectorate continued to engage with the school until the issue of non-compliance had been addressed.

1   *Percentage figures are based on instances where the check was applicable*

Table 9.6: Findings from checks 1 – 9 conducted during final CPSIs in 2019 and 2020

	Fully compliant	Substantially compliant	Partially compliant	Not compliant
Check 1	100.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Check 2	100.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Check 3	97.1%	2.9%	0.0%	0.0%
Check 4	100.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Check 5	91.2%	8.8%	0.0%	0.0%
Check 6	97.1%	2.9%	0.0%	0.0%
Check 7	100.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Check 8	93.3%	6.7%	0.0%	0.0%
Check 9	85.7%	14.3%	0.0%	0.0%

Source: Inspectorate, Department of Education

Table 9.7: Findings from check 10 conducted during final CPSIs in 2019 and 2020

	Very good	Good	Satisfactory	Fair	Weak
Check 10	52.9%	35.3%	11.8%	0.0%	0.0%

Source: Inspectorate, Department of Education

Findings from child protection safeguarding inspections indicate that parents were positive in relation to school climate and atmosphere, and well informed in relation to child safety; there was some scope to improve parents' knowledge about their child's learning in relationships and sexuality education

During an initial CPSI, parents are invited to complete an online survey.

The parent survey focuses on four main areas:

- School atmosphere and climate
- The provision of the school's child safeguarding statement and anti-bullying policies to parents
- Parents' knowledge of the school's procedures should they have a concern about their child or another child in the school
- Parents' awareness of their child's learning in SPHE including RSE and the *Stay Safe Programme* (primary only).

Overall findings were generally positive about the provision of information to parents, and in relation to school climate and atmosphere. For example, over 90% of parents reported that they had been informed of the school's anti-bullying policy and that they knew who to approach if their child experienced bullying. Also, more than 95% of parents reported that they felt welcome in the school and that their child was safe and well looked after in the school. However, survey responses point to some concerns in relation to parents' awareness that their child was learning about RSE or SPHE or completing the Stay Safe Programme in school. For example, 29% of parents who responded either did not know if their child learned about RSE or said that they did not learn about RSE. At primary level, 19% of parents reported similar sentiments in relation to the Stay Safe Programme.

There were high levels of compliance by boards of management in relation to reporting on child protection; more work is required in relation to record keeping

One of the checks completed during a CPSI is:

'The board of management reports that it is aware of and discharges its responsibilities to provide information to all school personnel relevant to child protection and that available training is undertaken by all or some members of staff as required'.

In 66% of initial CPSIs, the school was found to be fully compliant with this check. The figure for final CPSIs conducted during the period was 97%.

Another check, completed as part of a CPSI, is:

'Correct record keeping procedures were found in the records examined'.

For this check, of the schools that had child protection records, full compliance was found in just 19% of cases during initial CPSIs. In the remainder of cases where schools had child protection records, the schools were either substantially compliant or partially compliant. In 10% of schools, the check did not apply because no child protection records had been created. Reassuringly, full compliance with this check was achieved in all final CPSIs conducted during the period.

9.3. GAELTACHT EDUCATION

9.3.1 POLICY AND RESOURCING

Significant investment has been made to support the implementation of the Policy on Gaeltacht Education 2017-2022

In October 2016, the Department published the _Policy on Gaeltacht Education 2017-2022_. Between 2017 and 2020, a budget of €13.9m was allocated to support the implementation of a wide range of actions in the Policy on Gaeltacht Education. Additional resources have been provided to enable An Chomhairle Um Oideachas Gaeltachta agus Gaelscolaíochta (COGG) to fulfil its role in implementing Gaeltacht Policy actions, including the provision of continuing professional development (CPD) for the 134 schools participating in the Gaeltacht School Recognition Scheme.

> **THE POLICY ON GAELTACHT EDUCATION 2017-2022**
>
> The overarching goal of the Policy on Gaeltacht Education 2017-2022 is to ensure the provision of high-quality Irish-medium education in Gaeltacht schools to support the use of Irish as the main language of Gaeltacht communities.
>
> Initiatives arising from the Policy include: the Gaeltacht School Recognition Scheme, the E-Hub pilot project and Forás, a pilot Irish-language development programme, and a number of teacher education programmes to strengthen Irish-medium and Gaeltacht education across sectors.
>
> The Gaeltacht Education Unit in the Department of Education, established in 2017, is responsible for overseeing and supporting the staged implementation of the Policy on Gaeltacht Education and the Gaeltacht School Recognition Scheme to ensure that the Irish-medium education provided in schools seeking recognition as Gaeltacht schools, is effective and of high quality.

9.3.2 SCHOOL RECOGNITION

The Gaeltacht school recognition scheme was launched to strengthen Irish-medium education in the Gaeltacht

A key commitment of the _Policy on Gaeltacht Education 2017-2022_ is to provide schools in Gaeltacht language-planning areas with the option to seek recognition as a Gaeltacht school, on the basis of implementing specific language-based criteria, and conditional to participation in the language-planning processes provided for under the _Gaeltacht Act 2012_. To this end, the _Gaeltacht School Recognition Scheme_ was launched in 2017.

> **THE GAELTACHT SCHOOL RECOGNITION SCHEME**
>
> The objective of the Gaeltacht School Recognition Scheme is to provide high-quality education through the medium of Irish in Gaeltacht schools, and to support the extended use of Irish in Gaeltacht school communities. Additional supports provided to schools participating in the Scheme include: additional support hours for Irish relative to school enrolment, an annual grant of €1,200 for the purchase of Irish-medium resources, additional continuing professional development (CPD) and advisory visits from the Inspectorate.

Of the 132 primary schools in the Gaeltacht, 105 (80%) are currently participating in the Gaeltacht School Recognition Scheme and the option to join remains open to the remaining primary schools in the Gaeltacht (Table 9.8). All 29 post-primary schools in the Gaeltacht are participating in the Scheme. Due to the pandemic, the timeframe of the Scheme was extended to 2024, and schools participating in the Scheme continue to have access to additional supports to fulfil the language-based criteria to strengthen immersion education.

Table 9.8: School participation in the Gaeltacht School Recognition Scheme in 2020

School Level	Overall number of Gaeltacht schools	Number of schools in the Scheme	Number of schools not in the Scheme
Primary	132	105 (7,552 pupils)	27 (2,853 pupils)
Post-primary*	29	29 (6,708 students)	–
Total	**161**	**134**	**27**

Source: Gaeltacht Education Policy Unit, Department of Education

*A small number of students in eight of the 29 post-primary schools, which previously operated through the medium of English, are accessing Irish-medium education.

During the period 2017 to 2020, inspectors conducted 526 advisory visits to support schools participating in the Scheme (432 visits to Gaeltacht primary schools and 94 visits to Gaeltacht post-primary schools) (Table 9.9).

Table 9.9: Number of advisory sessions provided by Inspectorate for Gaeltacht schools 2017-2020

|	2017	2018	2019	2020	Total
Gaeltacht primary schools	133	160	133	6	432
Gaeltacht post-primary schools	28	35	29	2	94
Total	161	195	162	8	526

Source: Gaeltacht Education Policy Unit, Department of Education

During the same period, *An Chomhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta agus Gaelscolaíochta* (COGG) and other support services provided targeted professional development support to schools in the Scheme.

In December 2020, the Department published updated versions of *Indicators of Good Practice in Immersion Education: Guide for Gaeltacht Primary Schools* and *Indicators of Good Practice in Immersion Education: Guide for Gaeltacht Post-Primary Schools* to support boards of management and schools in implementing the language-based criteria to gain recognition as a Gaeltacht school.

During the period to which this report refers, the Department of Education, in collaboration with the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media, the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY), the Inspectorate, COGG, Údarás na Gaeltachta and other partners, has made much progress on the development of other publications to support schools in implementing the Scheme including the following:

- *A Guide for Gaeltacht Schools: Partnership with the community in promoting the use of Irish*
- *A Guide for Gaeltacht Primary Schools – Strengthening links between primary schools and early learning and care (ELC) settings*
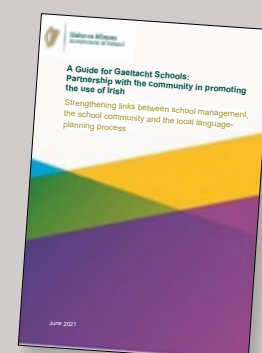
An evaluation of the *Gaeltacht School Recognition Scheme* is underway

In 2019, the Gaeltacht Education Unit, in conjunction with the Educational Research Centre (ERC) and the Inspectorate, commenced a three-year research and evaluation study to assess the impact of the Gaeltacht School Recognition Scheme to inform future policy and practice. One strand of the study involved the completion of nineteen case studies in twelve primary and seven post-primary schools in the Scheme. A comprehensive report on the case-study findings, *Report on case-study schools participating in the Gaeltacht School Recognition Scheme*, was published in September 2021. Overall, the findings indicated that the Scheme was impacting positively on schools' promotion of the extended use of Irish, including the fostering of links between schools and the local Gaeltacht community. The findings also indicated that there was scope to promote Irish as the language of socialisation further. More detailed findings from the case studies included:

- The vision underpinning the Scheme was impacting positively on the practice of boards of management, teachers, pupils/students and parents to promote the extended use of Irish.

- The two-year period of full early immersion in Irish in infant classes was being implemented effectively in case-study primary schools in the Gaeltacht.

- The use of Irish as the language of communication among pupils was very good in most Gaeltacht primary schools.

- There were specific challenges experienced by Gaeltacht post-primary schools in relation to the promotion of Irish as the language of socialisation among students.

- The co-curricular and extra-curricular activities provided valuable opportunities for pupils/students in Gaeltacht schools to speak Irish as the language of socialisation.

- Stronger links were being fostered with the local Gaeltacht community to promote the use of Irish, and practice was particularly effective when good links were developed with the language-planning officer.

- A renewed emphasis on the language enrichment of pupils/students in case-study schools was evident, although in some cases, a whole-school approach to the teaching and use of specific subject/curriculum terminology was required to cater for the differentiated needs of all pupils and students.

- There was a need, in some cases, for further planning to better facilitate effective transition from early learning and care settings to Gaeltacht primary schools.

- There was scope to develop the role of parents and pupils/students in the action-planning and school self-evaluation processes.

- It was necessary to continue to affirm and support parents and their children in promoting the extended use of Irish in the home.

As part of the research and evaluation study, the ERC will publish two further research reports in 2022. One report will focus on the views of principals and teachers in schools participating in the Scheme and the views of first and sixth class primary pupils, third year post-primary students, and their parents. The second report will include an analysis of pupil/student attainment.

9.3.3 INITIATIVES

The e-Hub pilot project extended the range of subjects available through the medium of Irish in post-primary Gaeltacht schools

The online *e-Hub Pilot Project* was launched in April 2019. The purpose of the digital e-Hub Pilot Project is to utilise online blended-learning delivery to extend the range of Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) subjects available through the medium of Irish to Senior Cycle students in Gaeltacht post-primary schools, commencing with Physics.

The Digital e-Hub Pilot Project

The digital pilot project, which was launched in April 2019, was informed by comprehensive research conducted on similar e-learning initiatives globally, where students supplemented their existing curriculum with online courses, when those subjects were not available in their own school.

The e-Hub project is delivered by e-teachers in two e-hub host schools. All participating schools received additional resources to support project implementation, including additional teaching hours to support the release of e-teachers and e-mentors along with a start-up grant to support the purchase of digital equipment.

The e-teachers offered annual taster sessions for Transition Year (TY) students interested in studying Physics through Irish for the Leaving Certificate, to encourage and inform their participation in the digital project.

Two of the first cohort of eight students successfully completed the higher level Leaving Certificate Physics course through the medium of Irish in June 2020; the other six completed the course in June 2021. At the time of publication of this report, a further twenty-two students from seven post-primary schools are participating in the e-Hub project. A second cohort of thirteen students commenced the online course in 2020 and a further nine students, in the third cohort, commenced the course in 2021. These students are expected to complete their Leaving Certificate in higher level Physics in 2022 and 2023 respectively. It is planned that a second Senior Cycle subject through the medium of Irish will be introduced to Gaeltacht post-primary schools in 2022.

Initial feedback on the e-Hub pilot was positive

The Department commissioned the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI), Northern Ireland, to provide an external, independent view of the e-Hub pilot project. The original timing and organisation of this evaluation was reviewed to take account of the constraints and limitations imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. The ETI presented its overarching findings on the e-Hub pilot project to the Advisory Committee for the Policy on Gaeltacht Education in December 2020. This evaluation report, *Independent Evaluation of the Gaeltacht e-Hub Pilot Project*, was published in March 2021.

The evaluation of the e-Hub project has shown that Leaving Certificate higher level Physics can be delivered successfully online, and suggests that there is potential to extend the project to facilitate the provision of a wider range of subjects through the medium of Irish to Senior Cycle students in additional Gaeltacht post-primary schools. The findings include:

- The leadership and oversight of the e-Hub pilot project was successful, well-resourced and managed effectively by all parties.

- Effective and differentiated lessons were delivered by e-teachers. Students were provided with valuable opportunities to engage with a range of digital tools and in collaborative learning experiences. Prediction and simulation software was used effectively to develop thinking and problem-solving skills.

- Students spoke positively about their online learning and interactive experiences.

- The digital pilot greatly enhanced the capacity of Gaeltacht post-primary schools to extend their curricular provision for Leaving Certificate Physics.

- There is potential to provide a wider range of subjects to small groups in more schools.

Forás, a pilot Irish-language development programme, commenced; it will be reviewed in 2021/2022

The Irish-language development pilot project, Forás, commenced in September 2018, as part of the implementation of the *Policy on Gaeltacht Education 2017-2022*.

Forás

The overall objective of the Forás pilot programme is to provide Junior Cycle students who have low levels of proficiency in Irish with access to supplementary supports to improve their competence and confidence in Irish. Forás is delivered in participating schools that provide full instruction through the medium of Irish.

The pilot involves the allocation of one whole-time equivalent teacher with a high level of proficiency in Irish to each of the participating schools.

Following an expression of interest process, two Gaeltacht post-primary schools fulfilled the necessary criteria for inclusion in the Forás pilot project. Each school received an additional allocation of one whole-time equivalent teacher to provide Junior Cycle students with low levels of proficiency in Irish with access to supplementary supports to improve their competence and confidence in Irish.

The Inspectorate continues to monitor the project through the provision of advisory sessions for the schools. Initial observations by inspectors highlight the need for participating schools in the Forás programme to outline pre-agreed measurable targets for each student, and to provide a regular report to school management on students' progress.

Due to the impact of COVID-19, plans to undertake an evaluation of the Forás pilot project in 2020/21 were interrupted. An external evaluation of the pilot project will be carried out by the Inspectorate in Spring 2022. The self-evaluation reports completed by each school during 2021 will inform this evaluation.

9.3.4 TEACHER EDUCATION

Many actions relating to teacher education in the Gaeltacht Education Policy have been implemented successfully

Many actions relating to teacher education in the Gaeltacht Education Policy have been implemented successfully.These actions, which relate in particular to the provision of Irish-medium education programmes, have helped to promote a high level of Irish-language proficiency among teachers participating in the programmes. They include:

- The establishment of a four-year Irish-medium programme for primary teachers, which is the first initial teacher education (ITE) programme in the history of the State delivered entirely through the medium of Irish. This teacher education programme has additional entry and exit criteria to ensure that graduates attain high levels of Irish-language proficiency. The programme is delivered by Marino Institute of Education and, since its commencement in 2019, has provided between thirty and forty new places per annum. There are approximately 105 students participating in the programme and the first cohort of primary teachers will graduate in 2023.

- A Master of Education (M.Ed.) programme, focusing on Irish-medium and Gaeltacht Education and delivered through blended learning, commenced in Mary Immaculate College in 2018 with additional Irish-language entry and exit criteria. The Department provides funding for thirty new places annually. A total of forty-eight students graduated from this Masters programme between 2020 and 2021. Two further cohorts of thirty students are participating in this programme currently.

- Since 2017, two teachers have been seconded to support the delivery of the Professional Masters in Education (Máistir Gairmiúil san Oideachas) in the National University of Ireland (NUI), Galway. Twenty-five participants graduated from the programme in 2019/20, a further twenty-seven graduated in 2020/21 and it is expected that up to thirty-two participants will graduate from the next cohort. The provision of COGG bursaries has boosted the uptake for this initial teacher education programme for post-primary teachers.

- Market research is underway to support the implementation of another teacher education policy action. This relates to the development of a consecutive two-year Irish-medium blended learning ITE programme for post-primary teachers.

As members of the monitoring groups that oversee the implementation of these actions, inspectors provide ongoing advice to support the work of the Higher Education Institutions.

9.4. IRISH-MEDIUM EDUCATION IN SETTINGS AND SCHOOLS OUTSIDE THE GAELTACHT

Plans are in place to further support Irish-medium education in settings and schools outside the Gaeltacht

In December 2019, the Department announced plans to develop the first comprehensive policy on Irish-medium education. This new policy, which will be developed in conjunction with other Departments including the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY), will provide a framework for the delivery of high quality Irish-medium education in early learning and care (ELC) settings and schools outside the Gaeltacht. This policy is part of the overall framework of the _20-Year Strategy for the Irish language 2010-2030_ and will complement and build on the achievements of the _Policy on Gaeltacht Education 2017-2022_.

The Inspectorate is participating in the intradepartmental group that has been established by the Gaeltacht Education Unit in the Department to progress the initial planning required for the development of this new policy. The policy development process will include a review of national and international research, a review of provision for Irish-medium education in light of supply and demand taking account of current trends and projected student enrolment. It will also involve a public consultation process to ensure the meaningful engagement of stakeholders throughout the policy development process.

A three-year pilot in content and language integrated learning commenced; as the pilot is ongoing, it has not yet been evaluated formally

In April 2019, the Minister for Education announced a three-year pilot initiative in Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL). The aim of the CLIL pilot is to support the learning of Irish by teaching Physical Education (PE) and other subjects through Irish to children across different age groups.

> **The Content and Language Integrated Learning Project**
>
> The CLIL project, which was launched in April 2019, is a three-year pilot.
>
> In almost all of the English-medium preschools, primary and post-primary schools involved, the project is promoting Irish through learning various curricular areas through Irish. In Irish-medium post-primary schools, the project is exploiting the experience of learning through Irish to develop further CLIL learning in Modern Foreign Languages.
>
> The project is being developed in two phases. The first phase of the project, which ran during the 2019/2020 school year, was developmental. It included the design and trialling of a professional development programme and resources for early years educators and teachers. The second phase of the project, which commenced in 2020/2021, allowed the project to be extended to a greater number of schools and settings, and involved larger numbers of practitioners and teachers.

Inspectors assisted the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Unit of the Department in the establishment of the project. Nineteen schools and early learning centres were selected to participate in the CLIL pilot, which commenced in September 2019.

It is anticipated that the early years educators, teachers and pupils/students involved in the first phase will become ambassadors for the CLIL approach to language learning as the project progresses. As this pilot was still ongoing, it had not been evaluated by December 2020.

9.5. SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY, ENGINEERING AND MATHEMATICS EDUCATION

Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) enable our children and young people to develop important skills and competencies, and also help prepare them for their crucial role in the future success of Irish industry, and research and development. These subjects are also key enablers for the Irish economy. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the importance of innovative and creative approaches to problem-solving, and emphasised how STEM education can prepare our children and young people to address challenges facing us as a society. Recognising the importance of nurturing, developing and deploying STEM talent, the *Action Plan for Education 2017* committed the Department to the development of a policy statement for STEM education, and an accompanying implementation plan.
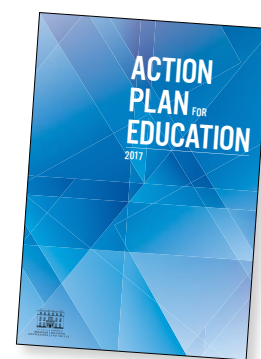
The STEM Education Policy Statement 2017-2026 and the implementation plan for its first phase (2017-2019) were published

The *STEM Education Policy Statement 2017 - 2026* was published in 2017 and implementation is planned to take place over three phases from 2017-2026:

Phase 1: 2017-2019, Enhancing

Phase 2: 2020-2022, Embedding

Phase 3: 2023-2026, Realising

An implementation plan, detailing timelines and responsibilities in respect of each of the actions set out, is being developed for each phase. The first phase was supported by the Stem Education Implementation Plan 2017-2019.

> **The STEM Education Policy Statement was informed by research, extensive consultation with stakeholders and by the *STEM Education in the Irish School System* (2016) report. It acknowledges the areas for action and recommendations identified in the 2016 report, recognises the reforms currently underway in the Irish education system, and explores how existing STEM activities and initiatives can be enhanced as well as incorporating new initiatives in order to maximise their impact.**
>
> **The STEM Education Implementation Plan 2017-2019 supported the implementation of the first phase of the Policy Statement. The programme of work spanned the four pillars of policy development and action identified in the Policy Statement.**
>
> - Pillar 1. Nurture learner engagement and participation
> - Pillar 2. Enhance early years educator and teacher capacity
> - Pillar 3. Support STEM education practice
> - Pillar 4. Use evidence to support STEM education

The Inspectorate evaluated Phase 1 of the implementation of the STEM Education Policy Statement; the findings identified a number of key areas where the policy statement and education implementation plan had yet to make the desired impact in settings and schools

During the period January 2019 to December 2019, the Inspectorate conducted an evaluation of the implementation of the first phase of the *STEM Education Policy Statement 2017-2026* in a sample of ELC settings, and primary and post-primary schools. The evaluation report, *STEM Education 2020: Reporting on Practice in Early Learning and Care, Primary and Post-Primary Contexts*, was published in August 2020. The findings indicate that:

- ELC settings and schools were prepared for enhanced engagement with STEM education.

- Many primary and post-primary schools had taken initial steps, and some were making very good progress and forging new pathways to maximise children and young people's education experiences and outcomes in STEM.

- Where practice was very good, learning opportunities and experiences in STEM were integrated seamlessly across a range of curriculum areas.

- There was a need to embed the national STEM education agenda further in ELC settings and schools.

- Further work was required to ensure gender equity in STEM education.

- There was scope to integrate learners' experiences of STEM education further across subjects in the primary and post-primary sectors.

- The development of creative environments that facilitate the incorporation of STEM education methodologies was seen as essential.

- Opportunities to foster the potential of STEM education needed to be considered and incorporated, where practicable, through school self-evaluation (SSE).

- Innovative approaches to supporting and incentivising schools and settings in terms of STEM needed to be identified.

9.6. DIGITAL LEARNING

When used effectively as part of teaching and learning, digital technologies facilitate children and young people to collaborate, solve engaging real-world problems, research and analyse information, communicate their ideas, and share what they create with others beyond the walls of their classrooms. International research[2] highlights the importance of integrating digital technologies fully into teaching, learning and assessment processes. The experience of the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the crucial role that digital learning played in mediating the curriculum safely in a remote learning environment. During the periods of closure, schools were supported by the Department and the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST) to develop an enhanced capacity to engage with digital technologies to support learning. It is now important that schools build on this good work and ensure that digital technologies form an integral part of our children and young people's learning experiences.
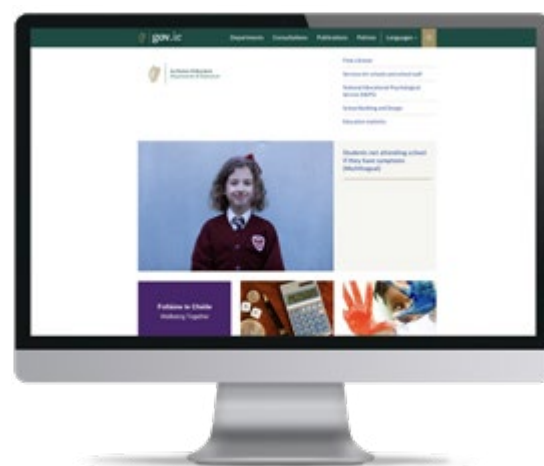
The Digital Strategy for Schools 2015-2020 provided a rationale and an action plan for integrating digital technologies into teaching and learning

The _Digital Strategy for Schools 2015-2020_ presented a clear vision for the use of digital technologies in Irish schools and classrooms. It set out a programme to embed technologies and digital learning tools in the learning experience of children and young people in primary and post-primary schools. While it did not reference the ELC sector specifically, both _Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework_ and the _First 5_ strategy mention information and communications technology (ICT) and digital technologies as part of learning.

The strategy was due to expire at the end of the 2020/2021 school year and the development of a new strategy is now underway. The new strategy will build on the existing one, taking into account the progress made to date in embedding digital technologies in teaching, learning and assessment, and new developments in digital technologies as well as any emerging priorities. The new strategy will also seek to build on the significant increase in the use of digital technologies in schools as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Digital Learning Framework was developed to assist schools in embedding digital technologies effectively into teaching and learning

A key action of the Digital Strategy for schools was the adaption of the UNESCO _ICT Competency Framework for Teachers_ for the Irish context, drawing also from other relevant European and international digital competency frameworks. The _Digital Learning Framework_ was developed to assist schools in embedding digital technologies effectively into teaching, learning and assessment. During the 2017/2018 school year, the Department invited schools to participate in a trial of the framework, and the Educational Research Centre (ERC) conducted an independent evaluation of the trial. The findings of that trial, published in 2018, informed the final framework, which was made available for use in all schools in 2018/19.

To support schools in their use of the framework, the PDST developed a suite of resources; these included planning supports and video exemplars of good practice from Irish classrooms.

---

2   For example, see the literature review in Butler D., Leahy, M., Shiel, G. and Cosgrove, J. (2013) Building Towards a Learning Society: A National Digital Strategy for Schools- A Consultative Paper that informed the development of the Digital Strategy for schools. Available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/69fb88-digital-strategy-for-schools/#see-also

The Digital Learning Framework

The Digital Learning Framework aligns directly with the domains and standards of Looking at Our School 2016. It provides clarity for school leaders and education providers in creating a shared vision for how technology can best meet the needs of all children and young people.

Inspection findings revealed considerable variations in the extent to which digital technologies were embedded in teaching and learning

During the period January 2019 to December 2019, the Inspectorate undertook an evaluation of digital learning in a sample of ELC settings, primary schools and post-primary schools. Despite many examples of positive practice noted in the evaluation, it was evident that the full potential of digital technologies to enhance teaching, learning and assessment had not yet been fully realised. The key findings included:

- There were considerable variations in the extent to which digital technologies were embedded in teaching and learning:
  - almost all settings and schools in the sample had taken positive first steps to further develop their practice
  - many ELC settings had considered, and begun to plan for, digital learning and a significant majority of schools had created a digital learning plan
  - there were many positive examples of digital technologies being integrated purposefully into teaching and learning
- While acknowledging that the use of digital technology is not always the most appropriate approach, inspectors found that digital technologies were under-utilised in many settings and schools.
- Policy advice and continuing professional development (CPD) to support the use of digital technologies was not evident in ELC settings.
- Challenges cited by settings and schools included:
  - varying levels of knowledge, experience and confidence in the use of digital technologies among early years educators and teachers
  - difficulties accessing high-speed broadband
  - a lack of resources.

The COVID-19 pandemic served as a catalyst to increase schools' use of digital technologies considerably

The periods of school closure, necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighted the importance of digital technologies to accommodate teaching and learning in a remote environment. As outlined elsewhere in this report, the Department supported schools through guidance documents and funding, and the PDST provided CPD and resources. The Inspectorate research on the return to school in September-December 2020 indicated that there was a significant increase in the use of digital technologies by schools. The research also reported very positive findings with regard to the availability and use of digital technologies in schools. Almost all principals who participated in the research indicated that their schools had a digital learning platform in place to support teaching and learning, and that teachers and pupils/students were familiar with using it. Pupils and students who participated in focus groups were very positive about their teachers' increased use of digital technologies. However, the findings of the Inspectorate's research also indicated that there was varied knowledge among the staff of schools, particularly primary schools, on how to use digital platforms and that, because of difficulties with connectivity to high-speed broadband, some schools had limited opportunity to embed digital technologies in their approaches to teaching, learning and assessment.

9.7. CREATIVITY

Critical and creative thinking (CCT) skills and competencies are recognised as an important element of learning for all. This is reflected in findings from international research, with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)[3] highlighting the importance and centrality of creativity to citizens' wellbeing, as well as the social and economic benefits that creative thinking skills provide. The societies and economies in which today's children and young people will live, will require them to be responsive, flexible, adaptable and creative. Consequently, creativity, critical thinking and innovation are important areas for early learning and care (ELC) settings and schools to consider over the coming decade.

In the Irish context, the Government has recognised the value of creativity in promoting wellbeing, the arts and for its potential economic and social benefits. This has led to an all-of-government focus on creativity, through the *Creative Ireland Programme*. This programme is built around key themes: Creative Youth, Creative Communities, Creative Places, and Creative Nation. The programme extends to 2022 and one of its key themes is a focus on creative opportunities and engagements for children and young people. The Inspectorate has representation on the Creative Ireland Expert Advisory Group and engages regularly with the Creative Youth Programme as part of its commitment to the development of strategic partnerships.

3   Vincent-Lancrin, S., Gonzalez-Sancho, C., Bouckaert, M., Luca, F., Fernández-Barrerra, M., Jacotin, G., Urgel, J. and Vidal, Q. (2019) Fostering Students' Creativity and Critical Thinking: What it Means in School. Available at: https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/fostering-students-creativity-and-critical-thinking_39557c9f-en

The Government funds a range of initiatives to promote creativity

Under the creative youth pillar of the *Creative Ireland Programme*, the Government funds a range of initiatives that promote creativity in children and young people. Key initiatives during the period to which this report refers include: *Scoileanna Ildánacha/Creative Schools; Creative Clusters; Teacher Artist Partnership* (TAP); *Arts in Junior Cycle* CPD; *Creative Engagement; Local Creative Youth Partnerships*; the *Arts in Education* Portal; *Arts and Culture in Education Research Repository* (ACERR); and *Music Generation*.

Creative Youth

The creative youth pillar of the Creative Ireland Programme was a successor to the Arts in Education Charter, which was co-launched by the Minister for Education and Skills and the Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht in 2013.

Creative Youth - A Plan to Enable the Creative Potential of Every Child and Young Person was published in December 2017 and stated the Government's commitment to ensuring that every child in Ireland has access to tuition, experience and participation in music, drama, arts and coding by 2022.

The key objectives of Creative Youth and the measures that have been supported as part of its implementation are to:

- Expand young people's access to creative initiatives and activities

- Focus on the inclusion of every child

- Support positive and sustainable outcomes for children and young people through creative engagement across formal and non-formal settings.

The plan applies to:

- Schools: enhancing arts and creativity initiatives in schools and ELC settings

- Teacher CPD: increasing and enhancing teacher CPD opportunities across primary, post-primary and ELC settings

- Out-of-school: improving cross-sectoral collaboration to support creativity for children and young people in the community.

Scoileanna Ildánacha/Creative Schools

Scoileanna Ildánacha/Creative Schools is a flagship initiative of the Creative Ireland Programme to enable the creative potential of every child. The initiative is led by the Arts Council in partnership with the Department of Education and the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media. It builds on commitments set out in the Arts in Education Charter, in particular in relation to Arts Rich Schools (ARIS).

Creative Schools aims to put the arts and creativity at the heart of children and young people's lives. The initiative supports schools to develop and implement their own Creative School plan. It also aims to develop and strengthen the relationships between schools and the broader cultural and community infrastructure within which they operate. Participating schools receive additional funding and the support of a creative associate to support them in developing their creative plan.
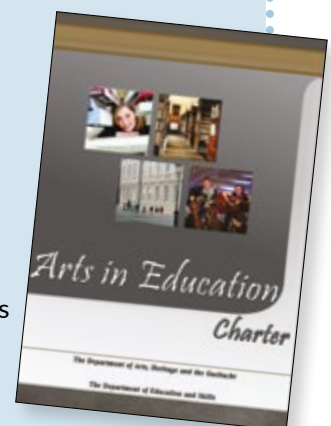
Creative Clusters

Creative Clusters is one of the key 'in-school' initiatives of Creative Youth. Creative Clusters was launched by the Department in 2018 as a pilot initiative. It is co-ordinated nationally by the Department in partnership with Education Support Centres of Ireland (ESCI), and is funded through the Schools Excellence Fund-Creative Clusters Initiative.

A Creative Cluster typically consists of between three and five schools/Youthreach centres who collaborate on the design, implementation, evaluation and dissemination of an innovative arts and creative learning project that supports them in addressing a common issue or challenge.

Creative Clusters include schools at different stages of their journey in using creativity in the classroom. Clusters consist of primary schools only, post-primary schools only or a combination of primary and post-primary schools. Engagement with the programme is on the basis of a two-year cycle.

CPD: TAP and Junior Cycle for Teachers

Under the Creative Ireland Programme, the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media provides funding towards CPD for primary and post-primary teachers.

Teacher Artist Partnership (TAP)

The Teacher Artist Partnership (TAP) CPD summer course and residency programme is an arts-in-education initiative that enables artists to work in partnership with primary teachers. The initiative is administered through Tralee Education Centre, with support from the Department of Education, and the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media. TAP was launched as a pilot in 2014 and was mainstreamed following publication of a research report on the pilot in March 2016.

TAP summer courses, which operate in all of the twenty-one full-time Education Centres in Ireland, take place in either July or August, and each course is delivered by trained Teacher Artist Facilitators. The initiative also includes funded Artist-in-Residency opportunities whereby participating teachers and artists work together in collaboration in the school during the following academic year.

During 2020, the programme introduced an accredited online course.

Junior Cycle for Teachers: Arts in Junior Cycle

Arts in Junior Cycle comprises a series of professional development experiences for teachers to support engagement with the arts and learning in Junior Cycle. The workshops, which embody the principles and key skills that underpin the Framework for Junior Cycle and the Arts in Education Charter, provide teachers with practical and creative methodologies to engage with learner outcomes in their classrooms.

The initiative is based on partnership and collaboration with key elective partners across the arts and education sectors. The initiative is administered through Junior Cycle for Teachers (JCT) and at Monaghan Education Centre.

Creative Engagement Programme of the National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals

The Creative Engagement Programme, which was set up by the National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals (NAPD) in 2004, is co-funded by the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media. The programme promotes creativity and initiative, and aims to encourage post-primary school students to engage with the arts.

Under the programme, grants up to €2000 are awarded to schools for arts education under clearly-defined criteria, and projects are undertaken on a jointly-funded basis with the school involved. The projects allow arts practitioners to work with students in schools to enable them to produce work in visual art, music, theatre, dance, film and poetry.

Local Creative Youth Partnerships

Local Creative Youth Partnerships (LCYPs) is a pilot initiative that was launched in 2018 under Creative Youth.

The LCYPs are led by local Education and Training Boards (ETBs). The partnerships are networks that enable information sharing and collaboration among local creative youth service providers to improve the use of existing resources, practices and initiatives in an ETB area.

They combine a wide range of human and infrastructural resources to develop and provide out-of-school, creative activities for children and young people that complement, and work with, the formal school settings.

A total of up to €300,000 per year was made available for the pilot up to the end of 2020.

Arts in Education Portal

The Arts in Education Portal, which is led by the Department, was established in 2015. Its founding was an objective of the Arts in Education Charter, which is supported by Creative Youth. The Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media and the Department of Education provide funding for the continued development of the Charter actions and the portal.

The portal is the key national digital resource of arts and education practice in Ireland. Its ethos is building a community of practice within arts and education, and providing a space where both artists and teachers can be supported and inspired. The portal provides an unprecedented opportunity for young people to engage productively with arts-in-education in Ireland.

Arts and Culture in Education Research Repository

The Arts and Culture in Education Research Repository (ACERR) was launched in September 2020. It was developed as part of the Creative Ireland Programme, with support from the Dormant Accounts Fund[4] , by an association of institutions that are committed to promoting Arts and Cultural Education, and Arts in Education Research. Its creation fulfils one of the commitments in the Arts in Education Charter.

The ACERR has joined the Digital Repository of Ireland[5] to deposit materials relating to arts and culture in education securely in a trusted digital repository. The ACERR intends to facilitate long-term preservation of arts and culture in education content from a broad range of backgrounds. It will facilitate data in a range of media, including video and images that will help researchers convey and demonstrate the findings of their research to the general public. Access to the repository is free.

Music Generation

Music Generation is Ireland's national music education programme. Music Generation is co-funded by U2, the Ireland Funds, the Department of Education, and Local Music Education Partnerships. It aims to transform the lives of children and young people through access to high quality performance music education in their locality. Through local music education partnerships, the programme aims to create rich and diverse ways for participants to engage in vocal and instrumental tuition delivered by skilled professional musicians, across all musical genres and styles.

In December 2017, the Irish Government announced its commitment to support the nationwide expansion of Music Generation by 2022.

4   Information on the Dormant Accounts Fund is available at: https://www.pobal.ie/programmes/dormant-accounts-fund-daf/
5   The Digital Repository of Ireland is a national digital repository for Ireland's humanities, social sciences, and cultural heritage data.

Initiatives to promote creativity are progressing well

Early indications are that these initiatives are progressing well. The *Creative Youth Plan* contains eighteen specific actions. The following summarises some of the key areas where considerable progress has been made since the publication of the Plan in December 2017:

- By the end of the 2019/20 school year, over three-hundred schools had participated in Scoileanna Ildánacha/Creative Schools.

- The Creative Clusters initiative commenced in the 2018-19 academic year with the establishment of twenty-three clusters comprising seventy-one schools countrywide. By the end of 2020, 220 schools had participated.

- Since 2014, 1,491 teachers and over 300 artists have taken part in TAP, with eighty-five facilitators trained to deliver the programme. In addition, there have been 655 residencies. The Inspectorate review of the TAP online summer course in 2021, found that the content was of a very good quality, and that it provided participants with a very clear understanding of how to develop best practice in teacher/artist partnerships to enhance arts education experiences in schools. Research has been undertaken to support the development of a new CPD model for early learning and care.

- Cruinniú na nÓg, the national day of free creative activities for children and young people, was launched in 2018 and was rolled out in partnership with every local authority. To date, the Creative Ireland Programme has run three very successful Cruinniú na nÓg days, including a wholly online and virtual event in 2020.

- The 2019 Local Creative Youth Partnerships (LCYP) pilot initiative enabled three ETBs to establish networks to facilitate information sharing and collaboration between local creative youth service providers to improve the use of existing resources, practices and initiatives.

- Full training in accessing the voice of the child was provided to those delivering initiatives such as Creative Schools, Creative Clusters and the LCYP pilots. This also helped to inform the development of programmes for Cruinniú na nÓg.

- A range of projects to increase and enhance access to out-of-school provision have been supported, including in the areas of music education, creative writing and youth drama.

Creativity is being reflected in the development of curriculum frameworks

Throughout the period to which this report refers, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) worked to ensure that creativity and critical thinking were reflected in the development of curriculum frameworks. For example, the key skill of Being Creative is embedded in Junior Cycle subject specifications which were informed by the framework.[6] It is also a key competency in the *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework* (2020).

As other curriculum frameworks are developed or amended, it is intended that creativity and critical thinking competencies will be signposted clearly within them.

---

6   *Department of Education and Skills (2015) Framework for Junior Cycle 2015 Available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/ aed00b-framework-for-junior-cycle/ or https://ncca.ie/en/junior-cycle/framework-for-junior-cycle/*

Inspection findings indicated that a shared understanding of creativity in educational contexts was not evident

While the arts offer a unique opportunity to develop children and young peoples' creative thinking, creativity is frequently conflated with learning in arts education. It has not always been recognised by either the system or by schools generally that creativity should form part of learning in all domains, and that it should permeate all aspects of this learning.

Inspection findings across all sectors during the period to which this report refers indicated that a shared understanding of critical and creative thinking in educational contexts had not yet been established. As a consequence, it had been challenging for schools to embrace an understanding of the multiple ways in which creativity might be promoted. Inspectors identified a need to clarify the meaning of creativity as part of learning, and to link this with actions relating to critical and creative thinking across all curriculum domains. To progress this, the Inspectorate developed the following understanding of creativity as it relates to teaching and learning:

The Inspectorate's Understanding of Creativity in Teaching and Learning:

In education, creativity is children's and young people's use of their imaginative capabilities to transform their thinking, and produce original and innovative ideas and solutions to problems. It involves children and young people engaging with others to investigate and hypothesise about existing knowledge, challenge assumptions, play with possibilities and take risks. The creative process results in products and outcomes in the form of original and innovative ideas, perspectives and artefacts, that are of benefit to the learner themselves and to others in wider society. The creative process in education is iterative and involves the growth and acquisition of competencies, such as crafting, demonstrating, improving and persisting.

While the arts provide a unique platform within which artistic innovation and creativity can flourish, creativity can and should be a feature of all disciplines. Creativity should permeate all domains of the curriculum, at all levels from early learning and care to higher education. There are opportunities for children and young people to develop their imaginative, creative and innovative capacities in their play, in music, drama, visual arts, literature and dance, as they write and as they learn and acquire language, in mathematics and in the sciences, as they design and make, when they work with food or when they engage in innovation and entrepreneurial activities. All learning provides opportunities for creativity to be nurtured and developed.

The Inspectorate produced an action plan for its engagement with creativity from 2020-2022

In late 2019, the Inspectorate prepared an action plan to guide its engagement with creativity in the period 2020-2022. The action plan followed on from the Inspectorate's Annual Conference in 2019, the theme of which was 'Unlocking Creativity in Teaching and Learning'.

The action plan was built on four pillars:

Pillar 1: Agree a shared understanding and help inspectors to build learning and expertise around creativity – Creativity Network and CPD for inspectors

Pillar 2: Evaluate and report on creativity in schools, ELC settings and centres for education

Pillar 3: Provide resources for schools, ELC settings and centres for education to support self-evaluation and development of creativity

Pillar 4: Develop and enhance the Inspectorate's strategic partnerships

The Inspectorate developed initiatives to promote creativity in teaching and learning

Following on from the 2019 Annual Conference, the Inspectorate established a working group and a professional network for creativity in education to promote and support creative thinking in teaching and learning across all curriculum areas and sectors from early learning and care to post-primary.

The Creativity Working Group was set up to advance the promotion of creativity in learning as part of inspection. Its work has included:

- Carrying out an audit on the presence of creativity within the Inspectorate's three quality frameworks for the ELC, primary and post-primary sectors

- Developing sector-specific documents on creativity to support inspectors to recognise, value and report on good practice relating to creativity in settings and schools

- Developing a proposal for a composite report on creativity that will draw on the findings of inspections during 2022, and report on examples of positive practice encountered in ELC settings, primary and post-primary schools and centres for education

The working group undertook an audit of the Inspectorate's inspection frameworks. It proposed that additions be made to existing statements of effective and highly-effective practices within inspection frameworks and that some new statements of practice be included, with a view to ensuring that creativity in teaching and learning would be encouraged and affirmed during inspections and school self-evaluation.

The professional network does not focus solely on arts-based subjects, but instead investigates how creativity can be integrated across curriculum areas and sectors, and contributes to developing pupils'/students' divergent and convergent thinking skills. The group has produced two newsletters for inspectors to keep them up-to-date with current thinking and informed of related 'creative' events e.g. Creative Schools.

The Inspectorate plans to publish a composite report on creativity in teaching and learning

The Inspectorate plans to publish, in late 2022, a composite report on creativity in teaching and learning in settings and schools. It is envisaged that the report findings and recommendations will inform and promote good practices in settings and schools, in the Inspectorate, and in the wider education system. Typically, inspectors observe creativity through the lens of the arts in a range of inspection models, such as curriculum evaluation and subject inspections. This report, in conjunction with the Inspectorate's broader understanding of creativity, will also endeavour to widen the lens through which inspectors evaluate and report on creativity and critical thinking in settings and schools.

Promoting creativity and encouraging schools to incorporate creativity and critical thinking into their work is included in the *Inspectorate Strategic Plan 2021-2024*.

9.8. MODERN FOREIGN LANGUAGES

In 2017, Languages Connect: Ireland's Strategy for Foreign Languages in Education 2017-2026, and Implementation Plan 2017-2022 were launched

Languages Connect: Ireland's Strategy for Foreign Languages in Education 2017-2026 and *Implementation Plan 2017-2022* were developed in the context of objective 1.6 of the *Action Plan for Education 2016-2019*. This purpose of this objective is to enable pupils/students to communicate effectively and improve their standards of competence in languages. They were published in 2017.

The strategy and its implementation plan aim to increase the levels of participation and competence in foreign language learning. While providing high-quality language learning opportunities and promoting competence in both official languages, Irish and English, is a very important objective, the Strategy also supports the learning of a range of foreign languages.

Languages Connect is committed to the development of immigrant languages as a national resource, and this is a process that should begin in primary school. The successful learning of Irish at primary school level provides a very good basis for the learning of languages at post-primary level and beyond. In 2020, four new curricular languages were introduced at Senior Cycle: Mandarin Chinese, Polish, Portuguese and Lithuanian. This development recognises the value that linguistic and cultural diversity delivers to individuals, society and the economy. These changes support greater inclusion and appreciation of diversity, and should encourage greater uptake of foreign languages at post-primary level. Also linked to Languages Connect is a proposal in the *Primary Curriculum Framework* published in 2020 to introduce modern languages to the primary curriculum from third class onwards.

> **The Languages Connect Strategy 2017-2026 and Implementation Plan 2017-2022.**
>
> The Languages Connect Strategy aims to improve learning of foreign languages in the Irish education system, and to increase the diversity of provision for languages as this can bring inherent benefits to individuals, society and the economy. In particular, it aims to put Ireland in the top ten countries in Europe for the teaching and learning of foreign languages, through a range of measures targeted at improving language proficiency, diversity and immersion. The Strategy sets out four overarching goals:
>
> - Improve language proficiency by creating a more engaging learning environment
>
> - Diversify and increase the uptake of languages learned and cultivate the languages of the new Irish
>
> - Increase awareness of the importance of language learning to encourage the wider use of foreign languages
>
> - Enhance employer engagement in the development and use of trade languages[7].
>
> Languages Connect outlines the main actions that will be taken to reach these goals during the lifespan of the strategy.
>
> Languages Connect also sets out commitments for the Inspectorate in relation to the status of foreign language learning. These include the provision of advice and guidance to schools about using school self-evaluation (SSE) and school planning to improve foreign language education, and the use of a range of evaluation approaches to monitor and report on the quality of foreign language education.

Members of the Inspectorate assigned to work with the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Unit of the Department contributed to the writing of the policy. The Inspectorate also participated in the Foreign Language Advisory Group, which was established to oversee and monitor the implementation of *Languages Connect*, and in the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) subject development groups for the new language specifications.

---

7   *The term 'trade language' refers to a language used by speakers of different native languages for communication in commercial trade.*

The Inspectorate evaluated aspects of the initial implementation of the Languages Connect Strategy

The Inspectorate published *Modern Foreign Languages: A Report on the Quality of Practice in Post-Primary Schools* in April 2020. It drew on data collated from the ninety-four modern foreign language (MFL) subject inspections in post-primary schools, conducted between October 2016 and September 2019. The key findings included:

- There was scope to enhance the learning experience for MFL students through greater use of the target language by both teachers and students, and through more active student participation in learning.

- Teachers should consider increasing opportunities to develop and promote the subject, including engaging in co-curricular and extra-curricular programmes.

- The consideration being given to re-instating the modern languages in primary schools initiative was timely.

- Regular linguistic upskilling in MFL, as part of teacher CPD, is strongly encouraged and curriculum and policy developers should also emphasise the importance of target language use in the classroom and the teacher's central role as a linguistic model.

- Greater emphasis should be placed on Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), and the merits of introducing CLIL into Transition Year programmes in post-primary should be investigated.

- Ongoing support for the heritage languages[8] is advised in line with the goals of Languages Connect.

- The implementation of the actions set out within Languages Connect should continue to be progressed in a timely manner.

---

8 The term 'heritage language' refers to languages other than the dominant language in a given social context. In Ireland, heritage languages will include any of the languages spoken by immigrant communities such as Chinese, Polish, Portuguese or Lithuanian.

9.9. EDUCATION FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Education for sustainable development is a key component in promoting sustainability and addressing the climate crisis

During the period to which this report refers, the climate crisis placed sharp focus on the concept of sustainability and sustainable living for our societies and economies. Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) is an important aspect of the United Nation's (UN's) strategy to support and promote sustainability and to address the climate crisis.

Figure 9.1:   Education for Sustainable Development

Source: UNESCO. Available at: https://en.unesco.org/themes/education/sdgs/material

Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) is informed by the United Nation's Sustainable Goals and involves providing experiences for children and young people to begin life-long learning on the 'what, how and why' of sustainability.

ESD is an umbrella term that can be linked to a range of policy areas including:

- Environmental issues (climate change, disaster risk reduction, biodiversity, environmental protection, natural resource management, urban decay, water security)

- Socio-economic issues (economic growth, poverty, food prices, child labour, social exclusion, justice, debt-security, human rights, health, gender equity, cultural diversity, production and consumption patterns, corporate responsibility, population growth, migration)

- Political issues (citizenship, peace, ethics, human rights, democracy and governance) (United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, (2005); UNECE, (2009)).

A key goal of ESD is to support children and young people to become informed and engaged global citizens. It allows them to develop an appreciation of the interconnectedness between social, economic and environmental systems.

ESD is not confined to discrete subject areas; it takes place across and beyond the curriculum, including through co-curricular and extra-curricular programmes and activities. It requires a variety of teaching approaches that allow children and young people to work independently and collaboratively, think critically, communicate effectively, make informed decisions, solve real-world problems and lead their own learning.

The Department progressed the national strategy on education for sustainable development

In consultation with key stakeholders, the Department developed the *National Strategy on Education for Sustainable Development in Ireland 2014-2020*. Implementation continued during the period to which this report refers.

The National Strategy on Education for Sustainable Development 2014-2020 is one of the key strategies underpinning the Action Plan for Education 2016-2019.

Education for Sustainable Development provides a framework to support the contribution that the education sector is making, and will continue to make, towards a more sustainable future at a number of levels: individual, community, local, national and international.

The key objective of the strategy is to ensure that education contributes to sustainable development by equipping children and young people with the relevant knowledge (the 'what'), the key dispositions and skills (the 'how') and the values (the 'why') that will motivate and empower them throughout their lives to become informed active citizens who take action for a more sustainable future. The strategy presents a set of key principles that underpin that objective, and includes eight priority action areas that are considered to be key leverage points to advance the ESD agenda in Ireland:

- Leadership and coordination
- Data collection and baseline measurement
- Curriculum at pre-school, primary and post-primary
- Professional development
- Further education and training
- Higher education and research
- Promoting participation by young people
- Sustainability in action

Progress was made in each of the priority areas identified in the Education for Sustainable Development strategy

In 2018, the Department carried out an interim review of the National Strategy on Education for Sustainable Development 2014-2020 in consultation with stakeholders. The report of the review, *National Strategy on Education for Sustainable Development in Ireland Report of Interim Review and Action Plan for Q4 2018-Q4 2020*, presents progress-to-date on each of the recommendations in each of the Priority Action areas identified in the Strategy. Key findings include:
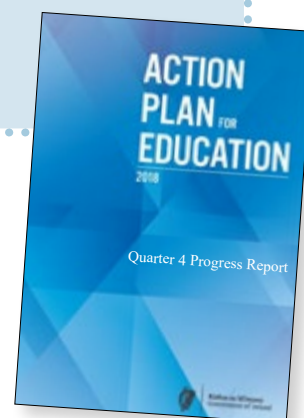
- During the period 2014-2017, Irish Aid contributed over €11m towards the delivery of Global Citizenship Education (GCE) programmes and projects in Ireland, including those related to ESD. This funding was provided through the strategic partnerships established by Irish Aid in key areas and also through the annual grant scheme.

- World Wise Global Schools (WWGS) trained 880 post-primary teachers in 2016-2017 and 806 in 2017-2018. From 2016-2018, 300 post-primary schools received in-school support from WWGS.

- A hub for ESD resources was developed on Scoilnet, with over 250 resources related to ESD. This can be found at: *https://www.scoilnet.ie/esd/*

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment published a study that reviewed opportunities for education for sustainable development within the curriculum frameworks

In 2018, the NCCA produced a paper _Education for Sustainable Development: A study of the opportunities and linkages in the early childhood, primary and post-primary curriculum_. This study reviewed curriculum frameworks and syllabus/specification documents in relation to ESD. It identified opportunities for building on existing curriculum practice and on potential linkages between subjects in primary and post-primary schools to support ESD. The study highlighted that opportunities for ESD and linkages will change and develop as plans for curriculum review and reform are realised across the various educational sectors.
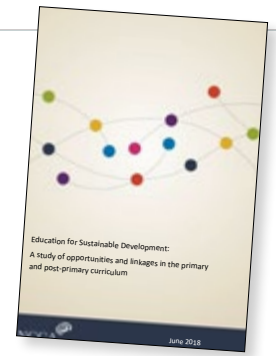
The Inspectorate progressed some of its targets under the Education for Sustainable Development Action Plan 2018-2020

Priority Action 4.19 in the _Education for Sustainable Development Action Plan 2018-2020_ sets out the following target for the Inspectorate:

Develop advice for schools to support implementation of national strategies such as Education for Sustainable Development, in the context of advisory activities related to school self-evaluation

Due to the pandemic, this work was postponed until the 2021/2022 school year and is currently ongoing.

The Inspectorate liaised regularly with the Curriculum and Assessment Policy (CAP) unit in respect of developments in ESD. It also continued to develop inspection processes and resources to take account of, and promote, ESD. Inspectors typically observe ESD through the lens of the Social Environmental and Science Education (SESE) and science subjects in a range of inspection models, including curriculum evaluation and subject inspections. As part of this work, during the 2021/2022 year, the Inspectorate will review provision and practice in relation to ESD in early learning and care (ELC) settings, primary schools and post-primary schools.

The Inspectorate is working to develop and build a shared understanding of education for sustainable development

Initial work on ESD within the Inspectorate commenced in 2019, with a view to developing and building a shared understanding of ESD across the Inspectorate and in schools. In April 2020, the Inspectorate established a working group to develop the work further. During the period to which this report refers, the Inspectorate ESD working group has undertaken a range of activities to promote a shared understanding of the concept. The group has:

- Engaged in research and examined key documents around ESD, including the UN Sustainable Goals, Curriculum and ESD, Department of Education and Governmental Strategy around sustainability and ESD, as well as the evaluation and reporting activities of Inspectorates in other jurisdictions

- Examined and highlighted where opportunities for the promotion of ESD exist within our existing quality frameworks (ELC, primary and post-primary)

- Proposed a small number of recommendations to the LAOS Review Group, to help make ESD more visible in the framework

- Developed a short statement to help inspectors reach a shared understanding of what is understood by ESD

- Provided CPD to all inspectors on ESD and sought their views on how ESD might be evaluated as part of our existing inspection models

- Commenced the development of short, sector-specific documents to support inspectors to understand the 'what, how and why' of ESD across the curriculum in the ELC and in primary and post-primary sectors

- Developed a proposal for a composite evaluation of ESD.

An important aspect of the Inspectorate's work and commitments for the period 2020-2023 is the need to help children and young people develop their knowledge, skills, competences and values around sustainability. The Inspectorate intends to publish a composite report on ESD in ELC settings, primary schools and post-primary schools in 2022. This composite report will draw on data and examples of good practice encountered during the course of scheduled inspections during 2022. We envisage that the composite report findings and recommendations on ESD will inform good practices in settings and schools, in the Inspectorate, and in the wider education system. This report, in conjunction with the Inspectorate's broader understanding of ESD, will aim to widen the lens through which we evaluate and report on ESD in settings and schools.

9.10. WELLBEING

Education plays an important part in developing children and young peoples' mental resilience and personal wellbeing. It equips them with the ability to adapt, work with others, think critically and be creative. It gives children and young people the skills and knowledge to fulfil their personal goals. Schools' important role in promoting the wellbeing of young people became even more obvious during the COVID-19 lockdown and school closures. The Inspectorate research during September to December 2020, highlighted the importance of being in school for pupils'/students' educational and social development, as well as their overall wellbeing. This was particularly evident in the survey and focus group responses from pupils and students. The findings also indicated that promoting the wellbeing of school communities was an important element of the successful return to school in September 2020.

Wellbeing was introduced as a mandatory area of learning in the new Junior Cycle curriculum

In 2017, Wellbeing was introduced as a mandatory area of learning in the new Junior Cycle curriculum. This was a positive step in raising understanding and awareness of wellbeing amongst school communities. The Department further acknowledged the need for a more thorough understanding of Wellbeing at a system level and, around this time, published the _Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice 2018 - 2023_. This statement set out the policy of the Department in relation to its role in the promotion of the wellbeing of children and young people in schools and centres for education.

The implementation of 400 hours of timetabled Wellbeing across Junior Cycle will be required by September 2022

Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) is one of the core strands of the Junior Cycle wellbeing provision. The others include _Physical Education_ (PE) and _Civic Social and Political Education_ (CSPE). Under the _Framework for Junior Cycle_, schools were required to move from a minimum of 300 hours for Wellbeing for students, to 400 hours of wellbeing provision for their first-year students from September 2020.

While many schools were preparing to move towards 400 hours, in some cases the disruption caused by school closures in 2020 presented challenges in moving to this level of provision. In view of this, schools were given the option to defer the increase of wellbeing provision by one further year. This was extended again in 2021, meaning that schools now have until September 2022 to plan for the implementation of 400 hours of Wellbeing across Junior Cycle.

The report on the review of Relationships and Sexuality Education recommended that the Social, Personal and Health Education/Relationships and Sexuality Education curriculum be redeveloped and updated

SPHE is a mandatory curriculum subject in all primary schools. *Relationships and Sexuality Education* (RSE) is required at all levels, from primary through to Senior Cycle. While SPHE is not mandatory in Senior Cycle, there is a requirement to provide six lessons of RSE each year. Where schools include SPHE within Senior Cycle, it is timetabled weekly across all Senior Cycle years.

The SPHE curriculum in schools, which includes RSE, has been in place since 1999. The *Report on the Review of Relationships and Sexuality Education in primary and post-primary school*, which was published by the NCCA in December 2019, set out a series of actions in relation to SPHE, one of which was the redevelopment and updating of the SPHE/RSE curriculum. The review of SPHE curricula commenced in 2020 and, at the time of printing this report, was ongoing.

Considerable work has been underway to support schools in promoting children and young peoples' wellbeing

The *Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice (2018-2023)* was published in July 2018. It aims to ensure that the promotion of wellbeing will be at the core of the ethos of every school and centre for education, and that evidence-informed approaches and support, appropriate to need, will be provided to promote children's and young people's wellbeing.

Since the publication of the Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice (2018-2023), considerable steps have been taken to help realise its vision. These include:
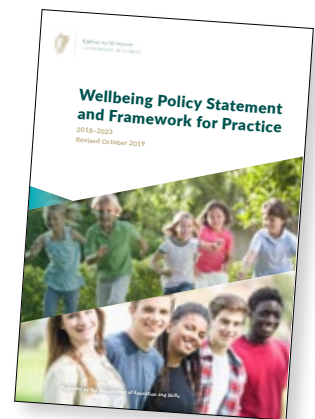
- The promotion of wellbeing in school communities was identified as a priority in Cumasú– Action Plan for Education 2019.

- An updated policy was published in 2019.

- A Department Wellbeing Office was established within National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS).

- A range of key resources in the area of wellbeing was provided for schools.

- Every school and centre for education was required, by 2023, to use the school self-evaluation (SSE) process to initiate a wellbeing promotion review and development cycle. Due to the impact of COVID-19 on school activities, this has been extended to 2025.

Findings from action research will inform the implementation of the Department's wellbeing promotion process

During the 2019/2020 school year, the Department engaged in an action research project to support the implementation of its wellbeing promotion process. The work was led by the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST), in collaboration with Junior Cycle for Teachers and NEPS. This research project aimed to assist the Department in reviewing and planning for the needs of schools and centres for education in relation to the promotion of wellbeing nationally.

The research project was completed and evaluated in 2020. The evaluation informed a planned national roll-out of training and sustained support for all schools by the PDST. However, the roll-out of this training has been delayed due to COVID-19 and the associated cancellation of face-to-face training.

Inspection findings indicate that primary and post-primary schools are effective in promoting pupils' and students' wellbeing. The review of the Social Personal and Health Education curricula provides an opportunity to build on this good work

Schools play an important role in promoting and developing pupils'/students' wellbeing and their socialisation, as well as their learning. At primary level, the overall findings from inspections in SPHE are positive. As reported in Chapter 4, inspectors reported positive findings in relation to wellbeing and the development of children's understanding of personal safety and bullying. The findings from surveys administered to learners and parents during whole-school inspections at primary level from September 2016 to December 2020 indicated high levels of positivity in relation to key wellbeing indicators such as learners' enjoyment school, feeling safe and cared for, and feeling that they are being treated with respect. At post-primary level, inspection findings (Chapter 5) indicated that students had high-quality learning experiences in PE and SPHE; experiences that are key to the maintenance and advancement of student wellbeing. The *Framework for Junior Cycle* (2015) provides for a new area of learning at Junior Cycle: Wellbeing. Also, the ongoing review of SPHE curricula provides an opportunity to strengthen an integrated approach to SPHE from primary through to Senior Cycle.

As outlined in Chapter 10, a focus on pupil and student wellbeing was an important element of the successful return to school for pupils and students after COVID-19.

9.11. APPROACH TO NATIONAL STRATEGY DEVELOPMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION

Consideration needs to be given to the range of national priority areas and the expected pace of their implementation

During the period to which this report refers, a considerable number of national initiatives were introduced within the school system and, at times, within schools. Many of these included a provision that the Inspectorate evaluate their implementation. Supporting and monitoring the implementation of these strategies places additional responsibilities on the various support services that work with schools, and can also lead to teachers feeling significant pressure to implement new projects, while also delivering on the curriculum objectives and assessment requirements of their subjects. It is to be welcomed that the Action Plan for Education 2019 reduced the number of initiatives, and noted the importance of considering the most appropriate time for change.
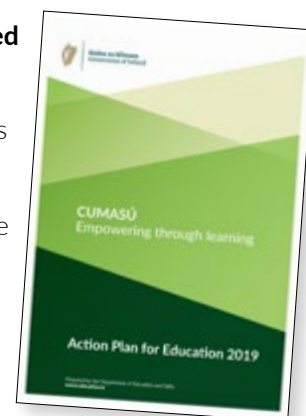
The COVID-19 pandemic placed a whole new range of demands on schools. The responsiveness of schools in providing remote teaching and learning, and their engagement in the associated CPD provided by the support services are praiseworthy. Because of the pandemic, some national priorities, including digital learning, have been advanced while others have been delayed. The scope and ambition of some of the strategies may now need to be adjusted, and additional accommodation made for priorities which have ongoing importance in light of the pandemic. An example of such a priority is the use of digital technology in schools, both as a support for teaching and learning, and also for online assessment.

The *Chief Inspector's Report 2013-2016* cautioned that the provision of CPD opportunities had been weighted heavily toward the provision of national CPD programmes to support curricular change, while schools and teachers varied in their CPD needs. It advised that the investment made in CPD should address the needs of individual teachers and schools more specifically. Some notable progress has been made in this respect during the period of this Chief Inspector's report, including the provision by the PDST of a significant level of bespoke support to individual schools, large numbers of teachers accessing CPD outside of school time through the education centres and the growth of online CPD provision as facilitated by some education centres during the pandemic. Nonetheless, there remains a degree of pressure on schools to accommodate national priorities while also addressing their specific CPD needs. The establishment of the *Primary Education Forum*, at which stakeholders and the Department can plan

the pace at which strategies and initiatives are implemented more effectively, has been a welcome development. Similar structures at post-primary level would also be beneficial; the success of the Advisory Group on State Examinations, which operated in 2020 and 2021, provides a blueprint for how this could be achieved.

It is acknowledged and accepted that, in times of significant reform, there is a need to sequence change more effectively. In line with this, and to allow reforms to become embedded, the Department should revisit the strategies and consider whether they are independent of one another or part of a cohesive whole. There is a need for properly integrated initiatives, and CPD in wide-ranging, long-term change such as Senior Cycle and primary curriculum. To facilitate this, the Department should reconsider the number and range of national priority areas, and its current expectations about the pace of these reforms.

It is important to build on the progress made to date in ensuring that connected and coherent learning experiences are provided at all stages of education from early learning and care to post-primary

A number of national strategies were published, or their implementation was progressed, during the September 2016 to December 2020 period. These strategies provide for the development of provision at all stages of education from the early learning and care sector to the post-primary sector. These include Department strategies such as the _National Strategy on Education for Sustainable Development in Ireland 2014-2020_, the _National Strategy to improve Literacy and Numeracy_ 2011-2020, the _Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice 2018 - 2023_ and the _Policy on Gaeltacht Education_, 2017-2022.They also include whole of Government policy strategies and frameworks such as the _National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making 2015-2020_, _Better Outcomes Brighter Futures 2014-2020: The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2014-2020_ and _First 5_: the Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families. Cross-sectoral thematic inspections carried out by the Inspectorate in the September 2016-December 2020 period have also assisted with the promotion of continuity of provision in relation to curriculum and pedagogy in areas such as STEM, digital learning and language learning.

The cross-sectoral focus in these strategies is helping to support the provision of connected, coherent learning experiences for children and young people at all stages of education, particularly in relation to the development of the core skills, knowledge and learning dispositions necessary to support learner achievement in areas such as STEM, Creativity, Wellbeing and sustainable development. Their implementation will also help to ensure that all adults involved in the provision of education in the early learning and care, primary and post-primary sectors are striving towards the common goal of improved learner outcomes and experiences in these important areas. This will involve collaboration and communication and the promotion of positive transitions between the relevant settings and engagement in partnerships with families and communities. It is important that this promotion of cross-sectoral continuity and development continues, and is built upon, as existing policies and strategies are implemented and revised, and as new policies and strategies are developed.

9.12 KEY MESSAGES

- During the September 2016 to December 2020 period, the introduction of a high number and a broad range of new initiatives presented challenges for schools.

Strategy implementation

- There were considerable advances in the monitoring of child-protection practices and procedures in schools.
- Strengthening Irish-language learning in the Gaeltacht is a core commitment of the Government, and this period saw significant investment and developments in Gaeltacht education.
- Early learning and care (ELC) settings and schools were generally prepared for greater engagement with STEM education. However, there are a number of key areas where the STEM Education Policy Statement 2017-2026 and the STEM Education Implementation Plan 2017-2019 have not had the desired impact in ELC settings and schools.
- The Digital Strategy for Schools provided a rationale and an action plan for integrating digital technologies into teaching and learning; however, the strategy did not reference the ELC sector.
- Inspection findings revealed considerable variation in the extent to which digital technologies were embedded in teaching and learning.
- There are early indications that the range of activities, funded through the Creative Ireland programme to promote creativity in children and young people are progressing well.

Curriculum

- There has been ongoing work to ensure that creativity is reflected adequately in redeveloped curriculum frameworks; a shared understanding of the meaning of creativity in educational contexts is now required.
- In line with the aim of Languages Connect to promote the development of immigrant languages, four new curricular languages were introduced at Senior Cycle: Mandarin Chinese, Polish, Portuguese and Lithuanian.
- Initial steps were taken in the implementation of education for sustainable development (ESD) in schools, with the focus on identifying opportunities to build on existing curriculum practice. The Inspectorate worked to develop and build a shared understanding of ESD, which was a relatively new concept for schools.
- Wellbeing was introduced as a mandatory area of learning in Junior Cycle. Because of school closures associated with COVID-19, schools were enabled to defer increasing their timetabled provision for wellbeing until September 2022. Considerable work has been underway to support schools as they embark on a review of their provision for wellbeing. A review of the SPHE/RSE curriculum commenced in 2020.

9.13. LOOKING FORWARD

- As indicated in the recent commitment to slowing the pace of some curricular changes in light of the pandemic context, the Department needs to reconsider the number and range of national priority areas, and to revise current expectations about the pace and nature of these reforms.

- Schools should ensure full compliance with record-keeping procedures related to child protection.

- The commitments to date to provide support for Gaeltacht education and Irish-medium education outside the Gaeltacht will need to be sustained. There should be active exploration of the opportunities for extending Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) as an approach to promoting the use of Irish among children attending English-medium primary schools in light of the pilot study that has commenced.

- The experience of COVID-19 has highlighted more than ever the important role of schools in the promotion of wellbeing. It is important that schools continue, as outlined in the Department's Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice 2018-2023, to promote wellbeing through the provision of a whole-school, multi-component and preventative approach. It is also important that they avail of the considerable supports and resources provided to support this important work.

Implications for teaching

- Schools need to be supported to further incorporate STEM education methodologies into their practice, and encouraged to implement innovative approaches to STEM.

- A key challenge for the system is to build upon the progress that schools made during the periods of school closure, in order to fully harness the potential of digital technologies to enhance teaching, learning and assessment.

- Policy guidance on the age-appropriate engagement of young children with digital learning, that clarifies expectations for the use of digital technologies, should be developed and implemented across ELC settings.

Implications for curriculum

- There is need for early years educators and teachers to deepen their understanding of the educational power of creativity, critical thinking and innovation, and the multiple ways in which creativity can be promoted in teaching and learning.

- Early years educators and teachers need to be given clearer guidance about how to implement ESD through the various curriculum areas, so that they can help children and young people develop knowledge, skills, competences and values around sustainability.

- The ongoing review of SPHE curricula provides an opportunity to strengthen an integrated approach to SPHE from primary through to Senior Cycle.

10

The Experience of COVID-19

10.1 INTRODUCTION

Education systems all over the world have been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. It has caused immense disruption in all walks of life and led to a seismic shift in how educators, children and young people work and interact with each other.

COVID-19 brought great challenges, but it also prompted impressive responses from people working in many sectors and services, including the education sector. All stakeholders in the education system committed themselves to working together to solve problems and find solutions that would protect learning opportunities for children and young people.

The Inspectorate was involved with our colleagues across the Department and with stakeholders, settings and schools in responding to the challenges of COVID-19. The rapidly evolving environment required us to respond with agility and imagination. We had to reconfigure the ways in which we interacted with settings and schools, and how we supported them. We developed new ways to monitor the quality of the experiences of children and young people, both at home and in schools and settings. Information from our interactions with schools informed policy-making in the Department and the provision of guidance to schools, including advice on their safe operation in an extremely challenging and changing context. We also played a key role in putting in place and implementing alternative systems to the state examinations in 2020 and in 2021. Our expertise was also called upon by the Health Service Executive (HSE) during this period. A large number of Department inspectors, and staff from Department-funded organisations were assigned, for a significant period of time, to support HSE teams in following up with schools where cases of COVID-19 had been reported.

This chapter focuses on both the initial closure of schools during March to June 2020, and the return to school in September 2020. It outlines the supports provided by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth and other agencies to assist early learning and care settings during 2020. It also outlines the supports that were provided by the Department of Education, including the Inspectorate, to support teaching and learning during school closures and to enable them to reopen safely and resume teaching and learning. The chapter looks at the many ways in which the Inspectorate adapted to the pandemic and continued to support the work of schools and settings. It also presents the main findings from advisory sessions and research conducted by the Inspectorate during both phases.

Context

Schools and early learning and care (ELC) settings closed on 12 March 2020 for the remainder of the 2019/20 school year

Extraordinary efforts made by all stakeholders to support the reopening of schools and ELC settings

Extensive additional supports provided by Government to support the reopening of schools and ELC settings

Extensive programme of research by Inspectorate to identify and disseminate effective practices

Model of inspection developed to support the safe and sustainable operation of schools

Alternative assessment arrangements put in place for Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate students

Inspection, evaluation and advisory support

2,873
contacts with schools during initial closure March-June 2020

3,224
advisory sessions undertaken to support schools after they reopened in September 2020

Research on how well schools and centres were operating in September-December 2020 period:
- Online surveys: **15,269** respondents: **162** principals; **1008** teachers; **6,228** pupils and students; **7,871** parents
- Discussion with principals in **2,491** schools and co-ordinators in **87** Youthreach centres
- **17** focus groups with pupils and students

740
Supporting the safe provision of schooling (SSPS) visits conducted

30%
of primary principals and
10%
of post-primary principals succeeded in finding substitute cover for all teacher absences

Key messages

The COVID-19 experience demonstrated that education reform can happen more rapidly than we may have thought previously

We should build upon the increased capacity of schools and teachers to use digital technology to support learning

Schools should prioritise new and enhanced ways of providing pupils and students with feedback on their progress

There is need to continue efforts to increase the availability of substitute teachers

10.2. SUPPORT FOR EARLY LEARNING AND CARE SETTINGS DURING COVID-19

Early learning and care (ELC) settings were forced to close in March 2020 due to COVID-19. As with the schools sector, there was an immediate impact on the children who could no longer attend those services and so could not interact, on a face-to-face basis, with the early years educators or the other children in their setting. It also impacted parents, particularly working parents, who had to make alternative arrangements in order to continue to attend work.

From the onset of COVID-19 in March 2020, the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) and whole-of-Government supports for the ELC and school-age childcare [1] (SAC) sector ensured that services continued to operate safely from the date when they were permitted to re-open, that staff continued to be employed by services and that the increased costs associated with public health requirements were not passed on to parents.

Since 2020, DCEDIY has been meeting regularly with key stakeholder groups to share information and facilitate discussion on COVID-19 related issues facing the ELC and SAC sectors.

The Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth provided a range of resources and supports for children, parents and early years educators during the pandemic closure period in 2020

The Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) set up the *Pre-school at Home Hub*, which provided a range of activities to support and encourage children's interests and to keep them playing and learning at home. ELC settings were also asked to connect with families to support the children in their setting during the closure period. A range of resources was provided to prepare for reopening of the ELC and SAC services. Continuing professional development (CPD) supports were also made available to allow early years educators to undertake online training or development activities to help them to meet the demands of their professional roles.

The Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth put in place a range of financial supports that enabled early learning and care, and school-age childcare services to remain sustainable through the initial closure period in March 2020 and during the periods of restrictions that followed

While services were able to reopen in June 2020, a reduced demand for services, the requirements to meet additional and new infection prevention and control measures, and the uncertainty around the future trajectory of COVID-19 all risked impacting on the potential of services to continue to operate. For this reason, the DCEDIY put in place a range of financial supports to enable ELC and SAC services to remain sustainable through the initial closure period and during the periods of restrictions which followed. Supports were also provided to ensure that staff remained connected to their setting.

DCEDIY and whole-of-Government supports provided for the sector during 2020 included:

- the continuation of DCEDIY subsidy schemes on an ex-gratia basis from 12 March to 6 April 2020

- the Temporary Wage Subsidy Childcare Scheme (TWSCS) from 6 April to 28 June 2020

- a reopening funding package, announced in June 2020, which included a reopening support payment for DCEDIY-funded service providers opening between 29 June and early September 2020. Also, the COVID-19 capital grant, which contributed towards capital costs associated with the reopening of ELC and SAC services.

---

1   School-age childcare (SAC) is defined as: any centre-based service for school-going children aged 4-14 years (inclusive), which operates during one or more of the following periods: before school; after school; during school holidays. See Department of Children and Youth Affairs (2020) National Quality Guidelines for School Age Childcare Services. Available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/b66c5-national-quality-guidelines-for-school-age-childcare-services-guidelines-components-and-elements-september-2020/

- the economy-wide support, Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS), became available in August 2020, with ELC and SAC employers entitled to access the EWSS, with an exemption from having to demonstrate the 30% drop in turnover that applied to other sectors. A sustainability fund was made available from 24 August 2020.

- a newly designed COVID-19 Operating Support Payment (COSP) for 1 February to 5 March 2021, that the DCEDIY had put in place on foot of the public health measures announced at the end of 2020. A new strand of the COVID-19 Sustainability Fund that had also been put in place for this period. Both were extended to the end of March 2021.

The Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, working together with the Health Service Executive, provided an extensive range of public health resources and guidelines to assist services to reopen and operate safely

In addition to the significant financial supports put in place, the DCEDIY, working together with the Health Service Executive (HSE), provided an extensive range of public health resources and guidelines to assist services to reopen and operate safely. These public health supports, which were kept under regular review in the context of changing public health measures, were updated and communicated to services on a regular basis. Where social distancing was not feasible for children of pre-school age, services effectively followed the sector-specific guidance for settings provided by the HSE on infection prevention and control during the COVID-19 pandemic, including the use of 'play-pods', with children and adults remaining together in consistent and small groups; this helped to minimise risk of spread of infection within services. Up-to-date guidance and support resources were made available to providers and parents on the First 5 website.

The Inspectorate re-engaged with early learning and care settings following the period of setting closures

In September and October 2020, inspectors made contact with early learning and care (ELC) settings that had been inspected prior to their closure in March. Between October and December 2020, inspectors also started the process of re-engagement with the wider ELC sector.

During 2020, inspectors developed a series of webinars, entitled Insights: Quality in Early Years Education in order to further support settings. The webinars were designed to share the findings, ideas and examples of effective practice that had been gathered during inspection visits to thousands of diverse ELC settings across Ireland since 2016. In recognition and support of the need for strong partnership across all learning contexts including home, ELC/preschool and primary school, each theme in the Insights webinar series contains webinars for parents, early years educators and teachers in primary schools.

10.3. CONTINUITY OF LEARNING DURING INITIAL CLOSURES OF SCHOOLS

10.3.1 SUPPORT AND ADVICE

Education settings had to adapt quickly to school closures. The Department provided them with an extensive range of supports

On 12 March 2020, the Taoiseach announced the closure of schools, early learning and care (ELC) settings, and further and higher education settings for an initial period of three weeks. As it transpired, due to continuing public health concerns, schools ultimately remained closed for in-person learning for the remainder of the 2019/20 school year. Schools had to adapt quickly to the new reality, and the entire country entered into a phase of remote learning and home-schooling.

The Irish school system was designed for in-person delivery of learning. While innovative initiatives, such as the digital e-Hub Pilot Project[2], have paved the way for future advances in online curriculum delivery, the information and communications technology (ICT) infrastructure in Ireland had been designed as one of a number of complementary methods to support the mediation of the curriculum in schools. Similarly, ICT had been viewed as one of a number of tools that children and young people could use to support their learning. It had never been intended that ICT would be used to provide remote teaching and learning for all pupils and students. This meant that schools, as well as pupils, students and parents, faced considerable challenges to maintain teaching and learning.

During the period of school closures, the Department provided an extensive range of guidance documentation and additional supports to schools. The Inspectorate had a central role in developing the support documentation that was sent to schools. Supports provided by the Department included €10 million in top-up funding to support the purchase of technology and devices for disadvantaged pupils and students, the early payment of Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) grants to support children and young people at risk of educational disadvantage, and a significant expansion of the Summer Provision 2020 programme for children with special needs and students in DEIS schools. The Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST) also provided extensive distance learning supports for schools.[3]

The Inspectorate engaged in an extensive programme of support, advice and data gathering

As an Inspectorate, we had to adapt quickly to provide contextualised support and advice to schools during this period. Initially, this involved individual inspectors contacting principals in primary schools, post-primary schools and Youthreach centres to engage in discussion regarding how their settings were providing for children and young people. As well as offering support and advice, inspectors availed of the opportunity to gather information on how schools and centres were continuing to engage with their pupils and students and supporting continuity in their learning.

Between 3 April and 30 June 2020, inspectors engaged with school principals and centre coordinators through a total of 2,873 support phone calls (Table 10.1).

Table 10.1: Number of support phone calls with schools and Youthreach centres during the initial period of school closures, March-June 2020

	Primary /Special schools	Post-primary	Youthreach	Total
Phase 1 (3 April – 1 May)	810	534	42	1,386
Phase 2 (4 May – 31 May)	775	137	36	948
Phase 3 (1 June – 30 June)	535	0	4	539
Total	2,120	671	82	2,873

The next section looks at some of the main findings from these interactions with principals and centre coordinators.

2   Further details on the e-Hub Pilot Project are available in Chapter 9 of this report.
3   These resources are available at: https://www.pdst.ie/DistanceLearning

10.3.2 SUCCESSES AND CHALLENGES

High expectations and the promotion of collaboration were key factors in achieving successful outcomes in schools and Youthreach centres

Effective leadership during the period of school and centre closures was underpinned by high expectations of staff and students, as well as the promotion of collaboration. From inspectors' discussions with principals and centre co-ordinators, it was evident that some had clear oversight of the quantity and quality of their teachers' engagement with pupils and students, and were cognisant of the value and importance of keeping open channels of communication within, and across, the school community. In setting and communicating very clear and high expectations to teachers in relation to engaging with pupils and students, a number of principals and centre co-ordinators, while acknowledging the challenges involved in delivering online learning, stressed that pupils and students were entitled to continue their learning and led their communities as they worked to build connectedness, upskill as necessary, and maintain continuity of learning. Some principals reported that they were capitalising on the expertise of specific staff members and facilitating the sharing of this expertise with others.

Schools and Youthreach centres experienced considerable success in making online learning available; however, a high proportion of children and young people had issues with access to broadband and devices

During the initial period of school closures, almost all primary schools, post-primary schools and Youthreach centres reported that they had made contact with their pupils or students and made assigned work available to them. Over 99% indicated that learning and teaching in their setting were being supported through the use of digital technology.

A significant majority of schools (61.5%) and an even higher proportion of Youthreach centres (79.4%) reported that they were aware of children and young people who did not have access to devices or broadband. However, a similar proportion of schools (61.2%) and Youthreach centres (79.4%) reported that they were in a position to provide devices to pupils and students.

As schools adapted to a new way of working, provision for pupils/students evolved, but some challenges emerged

A survey of parents, conducted by the Inspectorate in collaboration with the National Parents' Council (Primary) in April 2020, elicited the views of parents of pupils in primary schools and students in post-primary schools on the remote teaching and learning experienced by their children during the initial period of school closures. Overall, the survey results indicated that parents felt that the majority of primary and post-primary schools had engaged well with the challenges of distance teaching and had provided continuity of learning for their children.

One particular area of challenge reported by parents was the provision, by schools, of regular and practical feedback to pupils and students on their work. When asked if their child received regular and practical feedback from their teachers on work completed, almost a quarter (24%) of surveyed parents of post-primary students indicated that they did not. A further 6% did not know. The responses at primary level were more striking, with over half (55%) of surveyed parents indicating that their child did not receive regular and practical feedback on their work. A further 1% did not know.

Another area of concern that emerged from the survey at primary level was the need for schools to maintain more regular contact with their pupils. In particular, it was noted that 39% of respondents indicated that their child did not use digital technology to engage with the school with regard to their learning during this period of school closures.

A further area of concern to emerge from the post-primary parents' survey was the high proportion of students who had not established a good daily routine for keeping up with their school work at home. The need to provide further help and guidance to those students, a high proportion of whom were following the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme, was particularly evident.

During the initial weeks of school closures from March to June 2020, as well as using digital technology to support learning, primary and post-primary principals reported that hard copies of work were provided to pupils and students where this was considered necessary to mitigate the impact that a shortage of devices in the home might have. Other practices included the assignment of basic tasks, the provision of recorded and/or live lessons and the provision of feedback on pupils' and students' work. Many principals reported that they administered surveys to elicit parental satisfaction with approaches adopted by them, and that they used online platforms to facilitate communication between staff and boards of management. It was clear that some schools found the transition to distance learning somewhat easier than others where it took some time to adjust and put arrangements for distance learning in place.

There were also differences between primary and post-primary schools. Many post-primary schools had a pre-existing infrastructure that allowed them to adapt quickly, while many primary schools found it more challenging, at least in the initial phases of school closures. Principals indicated that, as the period of school closures continued, there was increased usage of some learning platforms and that the provision of experiences and tasks designed to develop new learning was more prevalent across both primary and post-primary schools. In both sectors, principals also reported an increased focus, as the period of school closures continued, on ensuring that there were arrangements in place to provide feedback to pupils and students.

Principals identified a number of challenges in relation to engaging pupils and students in an online environment during the period of school closures in 2020. A key challenge was engaging with pupils and students considered to be at risk of educational disadvantage. In particular, principals reported that it was difficult to make contact with some pupils and students for whom English was an additional language, and also with members of the Traveller community; a small number of schools reported that they had not established or maintained contact with some of these pupils and students. As the period of school closures continued, principals also indicated an increased concern for the safety, welfare, and mental health of specific cohorts of pupils and students, especially those who had become more vulnerable during the period.

10.3.3   IMPACT OF COVID-19

Research points to potential longer-term negative impacts of the pandemic restrictions on children and young people

An Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) report[4], published in July 2020, found that action was needed to address the short and longer term implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on children and young people. The report drew on existing and emerging Irish and international research on the effects of the pandemic restrictions on children and young people. The report concluded that:

- school closures and the lack of face-to-face interaction with peers and broader family networks were having direct effects on children's and young people's lives

- the impact of the pandemic would be felt most keenly by young people from more disadvantaged backgrounds and those with special educational needs

- parental job loss and the possibility of longer-term unemployment would affect child wellbeing through greater stress in families

---

4   *Darmody M., Smyth E. and Russell, R. (2020) The implications of the COVID-19 pandemic for policy in relation to children and young people: a research review. Available at: https://www.esri.ie/publications/the-implications-of-the-covid-19-pandemic-for-policy-in-relation-to-children-and-young*

In light of the ESRI findings, and other reports and research carried out by the Inspectorate, the Department put a range of measures in place to mitigate the impact of the pandemic on the education and wellbeing of pupils and students, particularly on those with special educational needs (SEN) and those at risk of educational disadvantage. As mentioned elsewhere in this chapter and also in Chapter 1 and Chapter 6, these measures included significant additional funding for digital resources, and the development of a suite of guidance materials and resources for schools. As well as guidance and resources related to wellbeing, other supports included the enhancement of the summer programmes for pupils and students with SEN and those at risk of educational disadvantage, the creation of seventeen additional psychologist posts and the provision of approximately 120 guidance posts to support student wellbeing in post-primary schools.

10.4 RETURN TO SCHOOL

10.4.1 SUPPORTS AND RESOURCING

Through a combination of extraordinary effort on the part of school communities and extensive additional supports provided by government, schools reopened successfully

Through the collective and extraordinary efforts of their managers/leaders, supported by staffs and communities, schools reopened successfully in August/September 2020. This involved the return of nearly half a million children and young people to schools, as well as over 80,000 staff.

In order to support and guide the reopening of schools, the Department provided an extensive suite of financial and advisory supports to school communities. Supports included:

- A new minor works grant to primary schools and post-primary schools to support the full implementation of COVID-19 response plans
- Funding for the employment of an aide to help with the logistics of reopening
- Funding to support additional cleaning costs
- A drawdown framework to enable schools to purchase necessary supplies of hand-sanitisers and personal protective equipment
- Increased management supports
- Special-needs assistant (SNA) substitution
- Additional supports based on calculated enrolment for developing schools
- A Department helpline for schools
- A comprehensive suite of guidance documents

While a primary objective of the Department in September 2020 was to support schools in encouraging students to return to complete their education, it was acknowledged that some students would choose not to re-engage with their post-primary education. The guidance document *Reconnecting with Education – Guidance for post-primary schools for students at risk of early school leaving*, which was developed and published by the Department with considerable input from the Inspectorate, aimed to support schools in encouraging students to return to school. The guidance also outlined options such as alternative pathways to further education or employment.

The Inspectorate played a significant role in supporting the safe resumption and continued provision of education

The safe and sustainable operation of schools during the COVID-19 pandemic was a national priority during 2020. In support of this priority, the Inspectorate conducted a programme of inspection visits to schools during the period September to December 2020, to provide advice and support on the implementation of the Department's guidelines in relation to creating a safe learning and working environment for all. These *Supporting the Safe Provision of Schooling* (SSPS) inspections formed the most significant part of the Inspectorate's on-site inspection programme over that four-month period (Table 10.2).

Table 10.2:   Number of Supporting the Safe Provision of Schooling inspection visits completed during the period September 2020 to December 2020

	Primary schools	Post-primary schools	Youthreach centres
Number of SSPS inspection visits completed	431	276	33

During SSPS visits, inspectors evaluated the school's level of compliance with the Department's COVID-19 response plans for the safe and sustainable reopening of schools.[5] A framework of checks was devised for this purpose and these checks were grouped into four main areas:

1. Planning

2. Appointment of a Lead Worker Representative

3. Provision of staff training

4. Implementation of control measures

The overall findings from these visits were very positive and showed how schools were working to ensure that they were safe places in which to work and learn. Overall, the findings demonstrated the extraordinary efforts made in schools and centres, particularly by school principals and centre managers, to ensure that children, young people and staff could work safely with the assurance that all required mitigation measures were in place.

10.4.2   ADVICE, EVALUATION AND RESEARCH

During the phase of school reopening, the Inspectorate engaged in an extensive programme of advisory, support, evaluation and research work

A key focus for the Inspectorate during the phase of school reopening was on advising and supporting schools as their pupils and students settled back into the routine of school. Schools were offered an opportunity to participate in online Inspectorate-led advisory sessions that focused on student wellbeing, teaching and learning, assessment and the promotion of school self-evaluation. These advisory sessions also placed strong emphasis on the needs of children with SEN and those at risk of educational disadvantage.

During the period from September to December 2020, evaluation work focused on a small number of priority inspections, including the completion of inspections commenced prior to school closures, risk-based inspections such as child protection and safeguarding inspections (CPSIs), evaluations of special care units and urgent follow-through inspections. In addition, our programme of SSPS visits provided a level of assurance to both the Department and the public that schools were providing a safe working and learning environment for teachers, other school staff and for pupils and students.

---

5   *COVID-19 response plan for the safe and sustainable operation of primary and special schools is available at:*
    https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/e1141-covid-19-response-plan-for-the-safe-and-sustainable-operation-of-primary-and-special-schools/
    and COVID-19 Response plan for the safe and sustainable reopening of post-primary schools is available at:
    https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/7acad-reopening-our-post-primary-schools/

The Inspectorate also engaged in an extensive programme of research work to identify and disseminate effective practice. This research involved:

- The collation and analysis of data from discussions with principals during advisory sessions in schools
- Surveys of principals, pupils/students teachers and parents
- Focus groups with pupils/students

The Inspectorate conducted advisory sessions, surveys and pupil/student focus groups, and analysed the findings

Throughout the period September to December 2020, the Inspectorate conducted online advisory sessions with school principals and other school leaders. In total, 3,224 advisory sessions were conducted during this period. An analysis of data from the first phase of these advisory sessions (1 September to 25 September) was published in November 2020. During this period, a total of 738 advisory sessions took place: 533 at primary level and 205 at post-primary level. The purpose of the analysis was to:

- Provide an overview of the successes and challenges experienced by schools during the period of initial school reopening
- Identify the main areas prioritised by schools for further advice and support

Another strand of the Inspectorate's research involved the issuing of online surveys to teachers, pupils/students, parents and principals. In total, 250 schools were involved in the first phase of these surveys which were conducted in October 2020. There were 8,423 responses from principals, teachers, parents and pupils/students.

As with the advisory sessions, a key purpose of the surveys was to provide an overview of the successes and challenges experienced by schools. An additional purpose was to identify specific issues relevant to primary, post-primary or the special schools' sectors.

During this period, the Inspectorate also conducted focus group meetings with children and young people in a sample of primary and post-primary schools. The purpose of convening these focus groups was to listen to, and understand, children and young people's experiences with a view to:

- Informing policy decisions and providing further guidance and supports for schools, teachers and pupils/students
- Recognising good practice in schools through the lens of pupils' and students' experiences of being back at school
- Realising the Inspectorate's commitment to capturing student voice

The paragraphs that follow summarise the key findings from this programme of advisory work, surveys and research.

10.4.3 SUCCESSES AND CHALLENGES

Schools reopened successfully despite experiencing significant challenges

The Inspectorate research findings indicated that schools reopened successfully thanks to a combination of their very effective preparation and the supports provided by the Department and other partners. However, this success came at a cost for many school leaders who reported, during discussions with inspectors, that they experienced significant pressure and high stress levels. Also, while many principals reported high levels of compliance and success with the implementation of the new protocols and routines, some reported challenges. For example, in some schools where space was limited, it was difficult to implement physical distancing protocols. Focus group discussions with pupils and students indicated that, overall, children and young people were very pleased to be back in school and were happy to be reconnecting with friends. However, some pupils and students identified gaps in communication and reported that they felt that they were not being included by their schools in the consultation and information process related to school rules and new protocols.

An additional specific burden reported by principals was the challenge posed by COVID-related teacher absences. In the Inspectorate's return-to-school survey of principals in the September to December 2020 period, only 30% of primary principals (including special school principals) and 10% of post-primary principals reported that they were able to access suitable substitute cover for all absences (Table 10.3). This finding underscores the importance of the work that was undertaken by the Teaching Council and the Irish Primary Principals' Network (IPPN) in relation to bolstering the number of registered teachers making themselves available for substitute work through the *Sub Seeker* portal.

Table 10.3: **Principals' responses to the survey statement 'I have been able to access substitute cover when a teacher has been absent in my school'.**

I have been able to access substitute cover when a teacher has been absent in my school		
Answer	**Primary (including special schools)***	**Post-primary**
Every time	30.2%	10.3%
Most times	30.2%	41.0%
Sometimes	37.2%	46.2%
Never	2.3%	2.6%

* Five special schools were included in the survey, out of a total sample of 100 primary schools

Schools reported good provision for pupils' and students' wellbeing; some staff had concerns in relation to their own safety

Principals reported considerable successes in the area of wellbeing during the September to December 2020 period. These included high levels of teamwork and collaboration, and regular communication in both the creation of a calm school environment and in assisting pupils and students to re-establish a regular routine. While the surveys indicated that teachers, parents and pupils and students were generally very positive in relation to how their school was providing for pupils' and students' wellbeing, a considerable proportion of principals and teachers reported that they, themselves, did not feel safe in school (Table 10.4).

Table 10.4:   Principals' and teachers' responses to the survey statement 'I feel safe in my school'

	I feel safe in my school			
	Primary schools (including special schools)*		Post-primary schools	
	Principals	Teachers	Principals	Teachers
Strongly agree	25.6%	23.6%	33.3%	16.7%
Agree	46.5%	40.1%	35.9%	30.9%
Don't know	11.6%	14.8%	20.5%	18.0%
Disagree	16.3%	15.6%	7.7%	24.0%
Strongly disagree	0.0%	5.9%	2.6%	10.4%

* Five special schools were included in the survey, out of a total sample of 100 primary schools

While teachers adapted their methods of providing feedback to pupils and students in the online environment, provision of feedback was a challenge for teachers during the return to school period

To suit the needs of pupils and students in the online environment, teachers had to adapt their methods of providing feedback to them on their progress. However, the Inspectorate's research in the September to December 2020 period indicated that there was a difference between primary pupils and post-primary students in their level of satisfaction with teacher feedback (Table 10.5; Table 10.6). In surveys conducted in December 2020, a majority (58%) of post-primary students agreed that only 'some' teachers provided them with regular feedback on their learning, while most (76%) pupils in primary and special schools agreed that their teachers did so.

In focus group interactions with pupils and students in primary and post-primary schools in November 2020, the difficulty of getting one-to-one feedback, whether in the classroom or for homework, emerged as an issue arising from the arrangements in place in their schools to mitigate the spread of COVID-19

Table 10.5:   Pupils' response to the survey statement 'My teacher tells me how I am getting on with my learning' (Primary)

Table 10.6:   Students' response to the survey statement 'My teachers let me know how I am getting on with my learning' (Post-primary)

Primary (n = 1,024)	Post-primary (n = 2,263)

My teacher tells me how I am getting on with my learning — **YES** 75.8% | **I AM NOT SURE** 17.1% | **NO** 7.1%

My teachers let me know how I am getting on with my learning — **YES** 31.2% | **I AM NOT SURE** 57.7% | **NO** 11.1%

There is an opportunity to build on teaching and learning successes, particularly in relation to the use of digital technologies

In the area of teaching and learning, successes reported by principals and pupils and students included the broader range of teaching methodologies being used. This included greater use of the outdoor environment and the more frequent use of digital technologies in lessons.

It was clear that the period of school closures had brought about an enhanced level of capacity in schools to engage with digital technologies to support learning. Early indications from the parent surveys of April 2020, particularly at primary level, were that a high proportion of schools were not equipped to engage effectively with students in the online environment. In response to this, *Circular 0074/2020*, published in November 2020, required all schools to have a communication and learning platform in place that would support students in the event of a partial or full school closure in the future. It was clear that the requirements of the circular, as well as the learning from schools' own experience, led to considerable improvements in the capacity of schools to engage with pupils and students in the online environment. School principals and Youthreach co-ordinators who spoke to inspectors described pupils' and students' high levels of enthusiasm about their new learning, and praised the creative and innovative approaches used by many teachers. Pupils and students who participated in focus groups were very positive about the increased use of digital technologies by their teachers. It is essential that schools are supported to build on their enhanced level of digital capability and continue to expand their use of digital technologies as a teaching and learning tool. Without support, there is a risk that the great progress that has been made will dissipate over time.

10.4.4 SUPPORT FOR LEARNING

Schools reported that they provided good support for the learning of pupils and students who could not be physically present in school because they were at very high risk of contracting COVID-19

Almost all principals of primary schools, post-primary schools and special schools with pupils and students who were at very high risk of contracting COVID-19, who responded to the December 2020 surveys, reported that they had measures in place to ensure that these pupils and students could continue their learning. In general, survey responses indicated that this support was provided by class teachers/subject teachers, special educational needs teachers, and by teachers who were themselves working from home because they were designated to be at very high risk of contracting COVID-19.

Addressing gaps in learning due to school closures was, and continues to be, a challenge for schools

Addressing gaps in learning, as a result of the lengthy period of school closures, was reported by principals as a significant challenge for schools. This was particularly the case for pupils and students with SEN. Issues identified by teachers and pupils and students also related to the facilitation of collaborative learning. In some cases, it was reported that the repurposing of practical rooms led to difficulties in the implementation of practical aspects of some subjects.

In focus group discussions, pupils and students expressed anxiety about being 'left behind', not being able to 'catch up' and having gaps in their learning. While the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) and the wellbeing resources that they provided during the pandemic were of valuable support to schools, it will be important for schools and for the system to continue to acknowledge this anxiety, and to put measures in place to ensure that pupils and students are supported sufficiently to overcome the unique challenges posed by the pandemic.

It is also vital that schools continue to identify where the most significant gaps in provision for pupils and students have occurred during the pandemic, and put in place action plans to address these gaps. This can be facilitated with the support of the additional resources provided by the Department, such as the _COVID Learning and Support Scheme_ (CLASS) to mitigate the adverse impact of COVID-19 on pupil/ student learning and wellbeing. Provision for the most vulnerable pupils and students must be to the fore in this planning process.

10.5 CALCULATED GRADES AND ACCREDITED GRADES

10.5.1 CONTEXT

The Inspectorate played a significant role in putting in place the alternatives for the state examinations in June 2020 and June 2021

The closure of schools in 2020 and the further interruption to learning that occurred in 2021 led to decisions by Government in 2020, and again in 2021, to postpone holding the state examinations in June, and to put in place alternative assessment arrangements for Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate students in both of these years.

Under revised arrangements, following the cancellation of written examinations in 2020 and again in 2021, the work and achievement of third year Junior Cycle students was recognised with a state certificate from the Department. Schools were also given autonomy to decide whether to run school-based assessments and, if so, what form they would take. The State Examinations Commission (SEC) put in place arrangements for small numbers of adult learners and early school leavers to take final Junior Cycle examinations in autumn 2020 and again in 2021.

Through extensive collaborative work involving all education stakeholders, alternative arrangements were put in place that enabled the vast majority of Leaving Certificate students to receive calculated grades in summer 2020, and for almost all students to receive accredited grades in summer 2021. These alternatives were based on the use of schools' estimated marks, a school-based alignment (moderation) process, and a system of national standardisation. In addition, students who participated in calculated grades or accredited grades and conventional written examinations were awarded the higher of the two grades achieved. The resulting Leaving Certificate grades allowed students in each cohort to access further and higher education and work opportunities within a normal timeframe.

The Inspectorate was heavily involved in the design and implementation of both calculated grades and accredited grades. Members of the Inspectorate participated in the Advisory Group on Planning for State Examinations in 2020 and 2021. They served on working groups that provided original proposals for the alternative systems used. They contributed to the design and refinement of the data collection and national standardisation techniques used. They served on related oversight committees and management groups and many inspectors worked alongside SEC and Department colleagues within the Calculated Grades Executive Office in 2020 and within the structures created to implement the accredited grades system in 2021. Also, in 2021, inspectors and other staff drawn from the Inspectorate played lead roles in developing guidance for teachers and schools, facilitating the collection of data from schools, creating improved processes for out-of-school learners, and in providing online and telephone support to all schools as they engaged in the estimation and moderation processes in schools.

Calculated grades and accredited grades were an effective response to an unprecedented emergency

A comprehensive analysis of the learning from the systems of calculated grades and accredited grades is beyond the remit of this Chief Inspector's Report, but some preliminary conclusions that are relevant to themes discussed in other chapters of this Chief Inspector's Report may be drawn, at least tentatively, at this stage. Principally, these relate to issues concerning the quality of teaching, learning, assessment and leadership in schools, and related issues such as teacher professional development and the design of curriculum and assessment. In drawing such conclusions, it must be borne in mind that both calculated grades and accredited grades were responses to an emergency and were developed in very short timeframes; the 2020 system of calculated grades was developed and implemented in an extremely short timeframe, while the 2021 accredited grades system was unprecedented in the choice that it offered to students who could chose to receive accredited grades, based on school-based assessments and national standardisation, or opt to sit conventional examinations and still be awarded their accredited grade, if better than their examination result. Some errors occurred in 2020 and had to be rectified. Despite the pressurised circumstances in which the systems for both years were put in place, they fulfilled their fundamental objectives and the approach to standardisation was upheld following legal challenge in the courts.

10.5.2   LEADERSHIP AND COLLABORATION

The experience of calculated grades and accredited grades demonstrated that significant change can be advanced through genuine collaboration between education partners

The experience of calculated grades and accredited grades demonstrated that complex issues and problems in the education sector can be addressed successfully, if tackled in a genuinely collaborative manner by committed education partners at all levels. The success of the calculated grades and accredited grades processes could not have happened without the open sharing of problems and the genuine co-construction of solutions that took place within the National Advisory Group for State Examinations towards the shared goal of enabling Leaving Certificate students to progress to the next stage of their lives. The fact that major innovations were implemented, albeit under emergency conditions, in a very short period of time and in a highly sensitive area also illustrates that significant change can be advanced when a shared, committed and collective effort is made. Also, the improvements made in the accredited grades system for 2021 (e.g. catering more comprehensively for out-of-school students and in-school students studying subject(s) outside school), demonstrated a desire to learn while still responding to the crisis.

The increasing attention paid to the voices of students was highly evident during consultations on calculated grades and accredited grades

The experience of calculated grades and accredited grades reflected the increasing attention paid in the education system to the voices of students. Representatives of second-level school students participated in the Advisory Group on State Examinations from its establishment, and their views were an effective and important part of the discussions in formal meetings and informal conversations. This attention to student voice accords with developments noted in other chapters of this Chief Inspector's Report.

A strong professional culture among teachers, combined with excellent in-school leadership, contributed to the success of calculated grades and accredited grades

The calculated grades and accredited grades processes emphasised the high degree of trust that students and parents placed in teachers and school leaders, and the strong professional culture that existed among teachers. Teachers participated fully in the provision of estimated marks and the associated alignment (moderation) processes, despite having serious reservations in previous years concerning teacher involvement in the assessment of students for certification. School leaders and managers provided excellent leadership that ensured that the data collection processes were completed to a high standard, despite all aspects of the system being entirely novel. Given the other COVID-related strains on teachers and school leaders at that time, this was a remarkable achievement by all concerned.

10.5.3 WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED

Teachers' experience of Junior Cycle assessment processes supported the operation of the estimation and alignment processes in the calculated grades and accredited grades systems

While the estimation of marks by teachers and their participation in alignment meetings for the purposes of Leaving Certificate were unprecedented, they built on processes in which teachers had engaged during the implementation of Junior Cycle reform. Teachers' oversight and assessment of classroom-based assessments (CBAs) and their participation in the moderation process that takes place at subject learning and assessment review meetings (SLARs) during Junior Cycle have already been referred to in Chapter 5. These processes were not dissimilar to the generation of estimated marks based on schools' overall judgement of students' learning, and the alignment (moderation) process at school level for calculated grades and accredited grades. It could be argued that, without that Junior Cycle experience to draw upon and the professional development that had been provided to teachers through the Junior Cycle for Teachers (JCT) support service since 2013, the implementation of calculated grades and accredited grades would have been even more challenging. The operation of estimation and alignment processes at school level was not perfect, but its successful completion may be one further indication that the assessment practices at Junior Cycle have begun to become embedded.

Calculated grades and accredited grades exposed vulnerabilities in our existing approaches to assessment at senior cycle

It has to be observed that the pandemic exposed the degree to which assessment at Senior Cycle in Ireland was extremely vulnerable to external disruption, because of its high degree of reliance on an end-of-cycle examination. In the technical language of assessment, Ireland's Leaving Certificate examinations are not highly distributed.[6] While the Leaving Certificate shares this reliance on end-of-cycle examinations with other systems that also had their origins in 19th century British examination systems (such as the current examinations systems in Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales and England), many other European systems were able to rely entirely on already well-developed systems of continuous, school-based teacher assessments when the running of conventional examinations in summer 2020 proved impossible.

In Ireland, the calculated grades and accredited grades systems achieved their purpose. However, the experience highlighted the emphasis placed on the final examinations in Ireland and illustrated that further use of non-examination forms of assessment, in addition to examinations, might allow for a broader-based judgement of student learning across a wider range of competences. In addition, the experience brought into sharp relief the stress for students that arises as a result of reliance on terminal examinations.

It must also be noted that while teachers participated willingly and professionally in the estimation and alignment processes, the national standardisation process also demonstrated the challenge that arises when the system endeavours to use school-based assessment on an extensive scale for a high-stakes qualification, such as the Leaving Certificate. It was clear that, in many cases, schools' estimates for calculated grades and accredited grades were much higher than they ought to have been, and that a national standardisation process was required to adjust over-estimation (and sometimes under-estimation) so as to ensure equity for candidates. No doubt this phenomenon was contributed to, at least in part, by very limited opportunities to provide teachers with the scaffolding to support this exercise, given the extremely tight time constraints involved and the circumstances of the pandemic. Because of the importance that the system accorded to teachers' estimates, it also proved challenging to implement the standardisation process in a way that maintained the confidence of stakeholders. However, this was achieved to a very large extent.

---

6 *Ireland's Leaving Certificate examinations rely to a great extent (though not entirely) on a final examination rather than a series of multiple assessment events.*

This illustrates that, if school-based assessment were to be used in any future assessment system, there would be a need for extensive professional development for teachers and school leaders concerning standards and assessment methodologies. Building on the work already done at Junior Cycle, this professional development would need to make teachers very familiar with detailed examples of student work that would merit the awarding of different grade levels, so that they could make assessment judgements with confidence. It is likely, too, that the introduction of school-based assessment would require greater levels of detail to be provided in subject specifications/curriculums so that there would be clarity for teachers and students regarding expected outcomes. It is also clear that a rigorous moderation process would be required to maintain equity of treatment for students and trust in the Leaving Certificate qualification.

The needs of students will be best met through a combination of existing assessment practices and evolving approaches based on broader modes of assessment

The calculated grades and accredited grades experience demonstrated many of the strengths of our examination processes and the high degree of public trust in the State Examinations Commission. State examinations may not be capable of measuring all the competences that we want young people to develop and, if not designed carefully and renewed regularly, they may encourage a style of teaching that places undue emphasis on an uncritical repetition of factual knowledge. Their outcomes, like other assessment approaches, may also reflect not only the achievement of students, but also a range of socio-economic factors in students' lives. Nevertheless, examinations enable us to assess a considerable range of student learning in a manageable way that is trusted by students, teachers, parents and the general public. They also challenge students to complete programmes of study, deepen their learning and be persistent in their efforts.

Perhaps, what the COVID experience has shown most of all is that we need to consider the possibilities that could be realised through a combination of the best of modern and evolving examination practice, complemented by other modes of assessment that enable students to demonstrate important skills that cannot be tested through conventional examinations. We have learned that there would be considerable challenges and risks in achieving such a goal; at the same time, we have evidence that by working with a common purpose and with imagination, new trusted solutions can be developed and implemented. Working collaboratively in a student-focused way, and with sufficient investment in curriculum and assessment capacity at the level of the student, teacher, school and national agencies, there is every reason to be confident that we can advance the second-level learning and assessment experience to address the current and long-term needs of young people.

10.6.   KEY MESSAGES

- The pace of change that was experienced in the education system during the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrates that education reform can happen more rapidly than we may have thought previously.

- The Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth and the Department of Education provided an extensive range of financial supports and other resources to assist early learning and care settings and schools during the period of school and setting closures and as they reopened.

- The continued work of the Teacher Supply Working Group to enhance the supply of substitute teachers and the planned employment of additional substitute teachers on supply panels are to be welcomed.

During school closures

- During the period of school closures, schools reported considerable success in engaging with the majority of pupils and students in mainstream schools and demonstrated high levels of adaptability.

- While schools were closed, there were significant challenges in engaging pupils and students who were most at risk of educational disadvantage.

- Parents reported gaps in the provision of developmental feedback to pupils and students on the quality of their work.

- The ability of a high proportion of schools, particularly at primary level and in special school settings, to engage with pupils and students in the online environment was underdeveloped.

When schools reopened

- The reopening of schools in September 2020 was achieved through the extraordinary efforts of school leaders and whole school communities, and was supported by an extensive suite of financial and advisory supports provided by the Department of Education

- Overall, schools and Youthreach centres operated in a safe and sustainable way during September to December 2020.

- The Inspectorate's re-engagement with early learning and care (ELC) settings included the development of the Insights: Quality in Education webinar series, which facilitated the sharing of findings, ideas and examples of effective practice from ELC settings.

- Despite significant efforts to increase the supply of substitute teachers in the system, principals continued to experience significant difficulty in covering COVID-related teacher absences.

- Many schools were successful in broadening the range of teaching approaches experienced by pupils and students when schools reopened, including enhanced use of digital technologies; there were some challenges in relation to providing feedback to pupils and students on their progress and in engaging pupils and students in collaborative learning and practical learning activities.

- Addressing gaps in learning as a result of the period of school closures was reported by schools as a significant concern.

- The safe operation of schools and the delivery of key projects, such as calculated grades, were made possible through a spirit of collaboration and co-working between all education stakeholders.

10.6 LOOKING FORWARD

System

- The education system and schools should continue to leverage the agility and responsiveness demonstrated during the COVID-19 pandemic as they continue to initiate and implement educational reform.

- Enhancing the supply of substitute teachers should continue to be a priority for the Department.

- Schools and the Department should endeavour to ensure that the challenges to wellbeing and anxiety, experienced by pupils and students as a result of school closures, is acknowledged and addressed.

- The increased capacity of schools and teachers to use digital technologies to support learning that has come about because of the COVID-19 pandemic presents important opportunities. Schools should continue to build upon the improvements that have taken place in this short period of time.

Support for pupils and students

- Finding new and enhanced strategies for providing pupils and students with feedback on their progress, whether in face-to face or remote learning contexts, should be prioritised by schools.

- Schools should continue to identify where the most significant gaps in learning have occurred as a result of the period of school closures, and should engage in action planning to address these gaps in a systematic manner; in doing so, it is vital that the needs of the most vulnerable pupils and students are prioritised.

11

Looking forward

This Chief Inspector's Report is intended to fulfil two functions: looking back and scanning forward. The previous chapters have set out an analysis of the early learning and care system, and the school system in which inspectors have worked in the period from 2016-2020. We have noted many strengths in provision, and a number of areas where improvements could be made to the important services that the education system makes available to children and young people. This chapter attempts to step back further and reflect on what the experience of evaluating and supporting the educational system may be telling us about the medium and long-term development of educational provision in State-funded schools and settings catering for children and young people over the next five to ten years.

11.1 Tackling the legacy of COVID-19

Recognising loss of learning

COVID-19 has undeniably impacted the education system in significant ways and this impact will have medium and long-term consequences for the development of the education system. As we discussed in Chapter 10, the closure of schools and settings, and the disruption to learning that children and young people experienced, have had, for many of them, a considerable and immediately negative impact on their learning and progress in several areas of the curriculum. At the time of writing, it is not possible to quantify precisely that learning loss for Irish young people, but the data that has been collected during the national assessments of Mathematics and English reading (NAMER) undertaken in 2021, and through forthcoming international surveys such as PISA, PIRLS and TIMSS, are likely to show some erosion in the overall performance of students in English literacy, Mathematics and Science.

The effect is not confined to these curriculum areas. Engagement by inspectors with schools and ELC settings has identified concerns across a range of issues caused not only by closures of schools and settings but also by broken attendance at ELC settings and schools, the absences from work of early years educators and teachers due to COVID illnesses and restrictions and interruption in access to therapeutic health services and interventions for young people. The cumulative effect of these conditions has affected many aspects of children's and young people's development. There is evidence, for example, that children's early linguistic development, students' social and emotional skills and students' wellbeing have been adversely affected, as well as the normal progression and maturing that we expect to see in students' ability and motivation to engage in learning .

Tackling the uneven impact of COVID-19

Given what our evaluations and the research of others have shown to date, it appears that the effect of COVID-19 has been experienced unevenly. Students at most risk of educational disadvantage have been disproportionately affected. It is possible, for example, that in the next few years we may see a slowing or even a reversal of the progress that we have made in Ireland in improving the learning outcomes of pupils/students in DEIS schools vis-à-vis pupils/students in other schools. It is possible, too, we will see a similar effect for pupils/students with special educational needs and those who require therapeutic supports. These sorts of effects are likely to persist for at least a proportion of pupils/students for some time. There is also another group of students who previously may not have been considered as having additional educational needs but who now do because of the impact of COVID-19: the isolation from these students' peers and friends during school closure periods, and the dilution of their motivation to learn without the face-to-face encouragement and support of their educators have left some students struggling to re-establish the routines and norms that were disrupted.

This legacy of COVID-19 is not unique to Ireland. Education systems across the world have had similar experiences and it has led many of them, and organisations such as the OECD, to consider how educational provision should be adjusted to ensure that greater supports are provided to more vulnerable learners. In Ireland, the intensive programmes provided for extended cohorts of pupils/students in summer 2020 and summer 2021 were a good first step in addressing these needs and it is welcome that planning is underway for similar programmes in 2022. The Department also introduced a Supplementary Programme and a CLASS programme, both of which provide additional resources to schools to address the effects of COVID-19. The increased levels of teacher allocations and funding to schools that had been introduced during the early stages of the pandemic were sustained in the 2021/22 school year to help to maintain enhanced pupil-teacher ratios. Funding for early learning and care provision was also enhanced during the pandemic by the employment wage subsidy scheme and a range of special grants to service providers.

At the time of writing, no decision has been made concerning future levels of teacher allocations and enhanced funding to schools beyond the 2021/22 school year, and the picture is complicated by a number of factors including rising numbers of students at post-primary level, falling enrolments at primary level, extensions of the DEIS scheme to further schools, and continuing teacher shortages at post-primary level. The long-term effects of COVID-19 on pupils'/students' learning, and particularly the learning of disadvantaged and vulnerable learners, will remain as a further factor to be considered in the staffing and funding of schools.

The evidence concerning how best to organise interventions to tackle the learning needs of students arising from COVID-19 is patchy to date. Some jurisdictions have allocated additional teachers and funding to schools. Other jurisdictions have chosen to devolve additional funding to schools and settings, and have allowed them to tailor interventions to address the specific needs of their students. In Ireland, as in several countries, we have adopted both approaches.

Irrespective of the manner in which the provision of interventions is organised, we know that interventions work best when they are tailored to the needs of individual learners. This means it will be important that the teachers, early years educators and other professionals involved in supplementary programmes and initiatives have access to detailed information about the needs and progress of the pupils/students participating in the intervention. Teachers and educators must design and track specific teaching and learning interventions to address these needs based upon a range of authentic data that demonstrates clearly the unique situation, profile and progress of each learner. Feedback of information from, and during, the intervention period will be very important to students' class teachers and early years educators.

Given the findings of this Chief Inspector's Report that teachers' assessment of pupils'/students' progress and their needs remains an area of challenge across the Irish system, it will be necessary to ensure that professional development for those providing intensive programmes is built into the planning for such programmes. Specifically, better guidance for practitioners on reporting back to classroom teachers and early years educators will be critical.

Maximising the benefits of advances in the use of information and communications technology

COVID-19 was not an entirely negative experience for the education system, of course. The most obvious benefit to arise from the crisis was the advances made in the use of information and communications technology (ICT) in the education sphere. Prior to the pandemic, the use of ICT in the Irish school system was relatively limited, being confined largely to its use as a presentation tool in classrooms for several curriculum areas. Its use in early learning and care settings was even more confined. As Chapter 10 has demonstrated, the need to move rapidly to the widespread use of remote teaching and learning during the closures of schools in 2020 and 2021 forced a fundamental shift in the capacity of teachers and students to use the technology, and a very large investment by Government in the availability of the technology to students.

More significantly, however, this COVID-induced change demonstrated the possibilities and potential of blended learning and more personalised learning experiences for young people. Advocates of greater use of ICT in education had been arguing for many years that ICT and online learning could open up greater possibilities for young people to engage with a wider range of teachers and other learning sources, and they have pointed out that ICT offered the possibility of personalised learning experiences for students. Progress in realising that vision had been slow, but was accelerated hugely by the need to make learning and teaching available to students during lockdown periods.

Even with the advances that rapidly developing Artificial Intelligence can offer, ICT cannot replace an effective teacher. However, ICT can make some forms of learning opportunities available at least as effectively as teachers; it can foster independent learning; it has the capacity to adjust the pace and content of lessons to suit the ability and progress of the individual learner; and it can provide tailored assessment and feedback to students and their teachers. Further advances in Artificial Intelligence in the years ahead will undoubtedly enhance the quality of the online learning experience.

Through ICT, we can also offer access to a greater breadth of curriculum and a wider range of teachers. This has obvious advantages for many students, most obviously for those who wish to study minority subjects and those who may live in isolated areas or attend smaller schools where the curriculum choice may be curtailed. The success of the Irish-medium e-Hub in the Gaeltacht schools and the work of iScoil in providing learning for students receiving home tuition are just two small examples of what is possible in this regard, when high-quality teaching and learning resources are developed and provided in an ICT and online environment.

Many education systems are seeking to capitalise on the advantages that the sudden shift in ICT capacity and the growth of Artificial Intelligence are bringing about, and this will be an important area of challenge in the Irish system in the years ahead. This will have implications in a range of areas, including initial and continuing teacher education, teacher recognition, curriculum design (discussed below), and the whole area of assessment, accreditation and micro-qualifications for young people during their schooling and for life-long learning. Most significant of all is the fact that the opportunities that are opened up by ICT require a level of digital literacy for all and equity of access to high quality ICT devices and facilities. In a way, the COVID-19 experience has confirmed that access to, and fluency in, using and understanding ICT in a critical, informed way is as important and basic a right as access to reading and writing became at the beginning of the 19th century.

Using education to advance social equity

The lack of early learning and care provision and in-person schooling during the periods of lockdown demonstrated very visibly how much children and young people can benefit from good publicly provided education. Parents, who found themselves in the role of home educators, became more conscious than ever of the challenges involved in providing systematic and developmentally appropriate learning experiences. We saw too, the importance of the social and emotional support that teachers and other professionals can provide for young people, and the contribution they make to ensuring that young people who may be at risk of harm or of becoming disengaged from education can be identified as early as possible.

The lack of in-person schooling and early years provision during two lockdown periods also demonstrated the important role that public education plays in advancing equity in Irish society. Early years education and schooling cannot address all inequities in a society but the availability of high-quality educational experiences can make an important difference. They provide structure for children and young people; they

help to sustain motivation; they encourage social interconnectedness and friendships. They help to provide children and young people, who are less advantaged economically and socially, with opportunities to develop their skills and abilities in ways that enable them to access further learning, secure their economic well-being, and live fuller lives as healthy and active citizens.

In Ireland, the learning outcomes of young people are less strongly dictated by their social and economic background than in many other countries . Several long-term policies have helped this situation to come about, for example, the sustained investments made in the quality of the teaching force, the success of the DEIS programme, the investments made in special education, the near universal uptake of the primary school system, and the adoption of a largely comprehensive style of schooling at post-primary level. All these have also contributed to more equitable outcomes for Irish young people. The disruption of access to in-person public educational provision – even for the short periods of lockdown – demonstrated this powerfully, but also showed that much remains to be done if we are to advance social as well as educational equity.

11.2 Early learning and care

Realising the potential of early learning and care

One of the most positive stories emerging from the period covered by this report is the transformation that is occurring in the early learning and care sector. For many years, publicly-funded childcare and educational provision for those under four years of age was far more limited in Ireland than in many comparable countries. In the 1990s and early years of this century, participation in early education was either paid for by a small minority of parents, who could afford the fees, to a variety of private providers or paid for by the State for a very limited cohort of children deemed to be at risk of educational disadvantage. Despite the evidence that high-quality early years provision could bring about sustained, long-term improvements in the learning achievement of all young people, investment in early years education by the State compared very unfavourably with spending at primary, post-primary and third level.

The move to universal early learning and care provision

In the decade since 2010, we have seen a transformational change take place in the State's interest in early learning and care. The Office of the Minister for Children, which had been established in 2002, became the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) in 2011 and it forms a core part of what is now the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY). In little over a decade, Ireland has moved to a position of universal provision and near-universal uptake of the publicly-funded Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme, as well as significant funding and subsidisation of early learning and care outside the ECCE programme.

The challenge of improving the quality of early learning and care

The involvement of the Department of Education Inspectorate for the first time in the quality assurance of early learning and care was just one strand in this remarkable period of policy formation and investment in the sector. The invitation, in 2015, from the then Minister for Children and Youth Affairs to the Department of Education Inspectorate to provide education-focused evaluations of settings in the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme affirmed the established belief in the early learning and care sector that high quality care and education were equally important for the healthy development and growth of young children. We brought an education perspective to the evaluation and improvement of ELC provision. In doing so, we complemented the work of many others, including Tusla, the statutory regulator for the sector, in supporting the national quality agenda in ELC settings through our specific focus on the quality of education in the settings and on how that quality could be further improved.

In a composite report on initial inspections undertaken by the Department of Education early years inspectors from 2016 onwards, we commented positively on the obvious commitment of early learning and care educators and setting leaders to provide good quality experiences for children. As we engaged with the sector through inspection, and in the consultations held prior to the formal commencement of EYEI inspections, we also learned about the unsatisfactory and precarious working conditions for many early years professionals, weaknesses in initial and continuing education for these professionals, the need for higher levels of funding in the sector, and the need for more cohesive curriculum provision from birth to six years across early years settings and primary schools.

Impressive progress in addressing structural, funding and other challenges

It is very welcome that, in the period covered by this report, we have seen actions led by the DCYA/ DCEDIY to address each of the above weaknesses. As outlined in Chapter 1, the extension of the ECCE programme in 2016 and 2018, making two years of free pre-school available to all children; the introduction of the Access and Inclusion Model in 2016, to support access and meaningful participation in the ECCE programme for children with disabilities; the introduction of new regulations for ELC services in 2016 (including the introduction of a minimum qualification requirement for early years educators); the introduction of the National Childcare Scheme and the extension of regulation to school-age childcare for the first time in 2019 have laid the foundations for wider access and have underpinned improvement in the quality of provision.

Fundamental questions and issues, including funding, professional learning for early years educators, working conditions and quality assurance are being addressed. Partnership for the Public Good, the report of the expert group on the funding model for early learning and care and school-age childcare, published in 2021, was supported by the announcement in Budget 2022 of a new multi-annual core funding stream for ELC and school-age childcare services. Nurturing Skills: The Workforce Plan for Early Learning and Care and School Age Childcare, 2022-2028 was published in December 2021, and details ambitions for the further professionalisation of the ELC and school-age childcare workforce as evidenced by the establishment of a Joint Labour Committee for Early Years Services to improve pay and conditions of employment in the sector.

Whilst our focus is on centre based ELC provision and practice, we acknowledge that many children's early childhood experiences take place in childminding settings and we welcome the publication in April 2021 of The National Action Plan for Childminding. This plan aims to bring all non-relative childminders within the scope of regulation and supports on a phased, incremental basis over the coming years.

Of particular relevance to the Inspectorate as a contributor to the quality assurance landscape of the ELC sector was the publication in December 2021 of Strengthening Early Childhood Education and Care in Ireland, a country policy review by the OECD examining how quality could be improved and assured in the sector. The findings of Strengthening Early Childhood Education and Care in Ireland endorsed the steps being taken in the areas of funding, professional learning for early years educators and working conditions. It also set out how both internal self-evaluation and effective external inspection could play their part in improving the quality of early learning and care provision. The Department of Education Early Years Inspectorate looks forward to working with our colleagues in the Tusla Early Years Inspectorate and the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) in strengthening quality assurance in the sector, informed by the OECD's recommendations.

A bright future for the early learning and care sector

Taken as a whole, these initiatives chart how Ireland can now systematically improve the quality of the care and education provision made available to our youngest citizens. The universal availability of the ECCE programme together with the further developments that are already under way to improve its quality, have the potential to be as important in transforming educational achievement and social equity as the move to provide free second-level education in the 1970s.

11.3 Curriculum

Getting the curriculum right

When the last Chief Inspector's Report was published, it noted the definitive move that education systems were making worldwide to emphasise to a greater extent than before, the importance of enabling children and young people to apply knowledge creatively and to develop a range of skills to equip them adequately for the 21st century. These skills were those that would enable them to engage in lifelong learning, to work in a rapidly changing environment, to live healthy lives and to participate as active and informed citizens in an inclusive society. At its core, this shift in the curriculum experience to be offered to students seeks to emphasise that enabling young people to acquire knowledge remains essential but is insufficient; that education systems serve young people best if they also foster their ability to apply that knowledge creatively, to work collaboratively to solve problems, to think critically, to communicate effectively, to adapt flexibly, and to make healthy and informed choices.

In the period covered by this report, the need for this type of education to be adopted in our education system has simply grown more obvious. The pace of technological change, the scale of the global environmental challenges facing us, the seriousness of the threats posed by the use and mis-use of social media, and the risks all these pose to our economic, social and personal wellbeing are just some of the factors that illustrate the need for us to equip our young people for a very different and challenging world. At the same time, these challenges illustrate how we need to foster different intelligences, dispositions, values and learning styles among learners, (for example visual, linguistic, logical/mathematical, kinaesthetic, interpersonal, intrapersonal), partly because they will need to utilise all these strengths and skills to create innovative solutions, and partly because we should value the contributions these intelligences can make to the realisation of an equitable, diverse and inclusive society.

International developments in curriculum and assessment

Work on advancing curriculum change has been slowed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, at international level, bodies such as the OECD and the EU Commission have continued to develop thinking about how 21st century skills can be incorporated more effectively into education systems. The EU Commission, for example, has advocated for the adoption of these skills into the national curricula of its member states. It has sponsored research on how some countries have attempted to advance such curriculum change with a view to disseminating good practice in this regard. Key messages emerging from that research point to the importance of fostering an understanding and acceptance of the type of change that is to be implemented among teachers, parents and students; the value of involving teachers and students meaningfully in shaping the implementation of curriculum change; the importance of investing in the skills of teachers and school leaders; and the absolute necessity to align teaching, learning and assessment.

Conscious that what gets assessed often has a powerful impact on what schools and other settings teach, the OECD has advanced work on how skills such as creativity and social and emotional skills might be assessed, and it has continued to evolve its PISA tests in the areas of Science and Mathematics to test how well students can apply knowledge in dynamic, online contexts. The OECD has also continued to advance its work on Education 2030, a project to inform thinking on what school curricula should look like in the next decade. Bodies such as the Atlantic Rim Collaboratory (ARC), which has brought together ministers, officials, teacher leaders and educational thinkers from a number of systems from Nordic, European (including Ireland), Canadian and American jurisdictions, have also examined the requirements of such curriculum change, especially as it relates to teacher education, student well-being and policies for social inclusion. Throughout Europe, many education systems have advanced efforts to reform their curricula and assessment practices in light of this work.

Thinking about curriculum development has also been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Emerging themes include consideration of the ways in which the curriculum experience may be more personalised for learners because of the advances in ICT, ways in which instruction may capitalise on the strengths of both synchronous and asynchronous learning, and a continuing emphasis on pedagogy that is learner-centred, inquiry-based, authentic and powerful.

Lessons from Junior Cycle reform

In Ireland, the most significant element of curriculum change to have been advanced in the period covered by this report has been reform at Junior Cycle. As this report is finalised, third year students in Irish post-primary schools are completing the third and final year of their Junior Cycle programme. This cohort of students will be the first to complete all of their subjects in the new formats developed by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) and introduced as part of Junior Cycle reform. They will complete classroom-based assessments assessed by their teachers, as well as final examinations that will be set externally and marked by the State Examinations Commission in summer 2022. This reform was launched in 2012 in less than favourable circumstances, as education, like all public services, experienced restrictions in spending in the wake of Ireland's economic crash. Some aspects of this programme of reform were controversial, most notably the introduction of elements of school-based and teacher-implemented assessment as part of the overall assessment of the student's learning. The initial implementation phase was mired in industrial relations difficulties which delayed the development of curricula and assessment arrangements, and the roll-out of professional development. None of this helped to create an atmosphere in which stakeholders could focus on an agreed programme of change.

Nevertheless, significant investment was made in offering sustained professional development for teachers (through the Junior Cycle for Teachers national support service) and in providing large numbers of additional teachers and additional school management capacity to the post-primary school system. As discussed in Chapter 5 above, there is some emerging evidence that at least some key elements of the Junior Cycle changes are proving their worth, although much work continues to be required to achieve all that Junior Cycle reform promised. Teachers and inspectors report that there is a greater emphasis in teaching on the sort of skills incorporated in the new specifications for each subject on the curriculum. There is also a greater emphasis on areas of learning that support student well-being. Assessment has been broadened to include not only terminal, summative examinations but also classroom-based assessments where a broader range of skills may be demonstrated by students and assessed by teachers. Most significantly, there is evidence to suggest that the provision of teacher time for out-of-class professional duties, including engagement in moderation meetings, has created welcome opportunities and impetus for the sort of professional dialogue among teachers that is known to improve teachers' practice.

The challenge of Senior Cycle reform

The challenge now facing us is to reform the curriculum and assessment experience at Senior Cycle. This will be a considerably more challenging task than reform at Junior Cycle. There are many aspects of Senior Cycle education that work well at present and which students, teachers, parents and others will want to see safeguarded. For example, at present, we perform well when compared internationally against other high-performing systems and the data shows us as having a relatively high-performing and equitable system. We have also been very successful at retaining high proportions of students in second-level education and lowering early school leaving. However, simply replicating what we do well now will not be adequate for young people in the years ahead; it will not ensure that Irish school leavers continue to be regarded as among some of the best in the world; it will not ensure equitable outcomes for Irish students and Irish society.

Irish upper secondary education has not altered fundamentally since the 1990s when Transition Year was introduced and the differentiated programmes of the Leaving Certificate, the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme and the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) were introduced. While these have provided differentiated pathways for students, the established Leaving Certificate has become more and more dominant, while onward progression beyond second level education for those completing LCA and LCVP programmes is more limited. Students with special educational needs, who currently have Level 1 and Level 2 programmes available to them at Junior Cycle have no equivalent programme at Senior Cycle. As discussed in Chapter 10, there is also a growing appetite for change in the way student learning is assessed, partly to lessen stress for students, but also to ensure that we assess and accredit a broader range of skills and competences and lessen the rewarding of 'rote learning' of knowledge.

It is to be welcomed that the NCCA, aided by the OECD, has engaged in a detailed and highly consultative examination of Senior Cycle to chart a possible way forward. At the time of writing, the Minister for Education is considering the NCCA's proposals. In moving forward, it will be essential that we strive to

create a consensus for evolutionary (rather than revolutionary) change if we are to achieve the sort of development that will sustain Irish learners into the future. Senior Cycle is a phase of education that has a very obvious, long-term impact on the lives and life-chances of individual students. The extensive changes to specifications and syllabi, and the substitution of emergency measures such as Calculated Grades and Accredited Grades in place of examinations during the pandemic, have undoubtedly created a greater appetite for change, but they have also led to simplistic notions that Senior Cycle change can be readily achieved overnight. Nothing could be further from the truth. We need to build understanding and trust in the evolutionary change that is necessary, most particularly among teachers, school leaders, parents, students and the wider public.

Building trust and collaboration at Senior Cycle

Building that trust takes time and will require sustained commitment over many years. It will also require investment in teachers' skills, in leadership capacity and in our initial and continuing teacher education providers. Investment in our ability to assess and report on students' learning will be especially important: assessing a broader range of skills fairly and equitably, ensuring adequate quality assurance of assessment practice, building the capacity of the system to use and understand more diverse forms of assessment – all of these will require imaginative work at the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, at the State Examinations Commission, in teacher education provision, among school leaders, in external school evaluation and inspection, and among policy makers.

Strong stakeholder collaboration – and especially with students and parents – proved its worth during the COVID-19 pandemic; it will be equally important in shaping and implementing Senior Cycle reform. Senior Cycle education also links closely to the worlds of work and further study. This means that effective changes in learning and assessment cannot take place at upper secondary level without strong linkages to, and reciprocal changes in, the world of further and higher education and in the access routes to this tertiary educational provision. It is worth noting, for example, that like the current structures of the established Leaving Certificate, LCA and LCVP, the defining features of the modern Central Applications Office (CAO) points system also have their roots as far back as the 1990s and the last significant review of points allocations was initiated almost a decade ago in 2012.

Advancing curriculum and assessment change at primary level

In the period covered by this report, the NCCA has also commenced a wide-ranging consultation on how the primary curriculum should be evolved. This work was also delayed by the COVID-19 emergency, but has been re-invigorated at the time of writing. The evidence from inspection suggests that the scale of the change that is likely to be needed at this level is less significant than that at Senior Cycle, but the lessons from Junior Cycle reform and the factors discussed above about Senior Cycle change are equally applicable. Teachers need to know that we value what is effective in current practice and that we are seeking to build upon that strength. Adequate investment is required in teachers' and school leaders' skills, and in resourcing teacher and leadership time for professional development and collaborative working. The need to ensure that the views of students and parents are given a central role in the decisions made about evolving the nature of the curriculum will also be very important.

Curriculum transition from early learning and care to primary

One aspect of curriculum change that will need to be tackled in the evolution of the primary curriculum is the need to ensure greater coherence between curriculum experiences in ELC settings informed by Aistear, the curriculum framework for early years education, and the curriculum experience for four and five year olds in primary schools. As discussed in Chapter 4 above, work is required to ensure that the learning experiences of four and five year olds in primary school is aligned sufficiently with best practice in early years education. There is also need to consider the implications of the later starting age of children in primary school on the content and delivery of the primary curriculum, on the potential age range within classes, and at various stages of schooling.

Specific curriculum issues and initiatives

When the last Chief Inspector's Report was issued, it expressed some concern that a number of curriculum initiatives had been launched simultaneously, including strategies to improve language teaching, wellbeing, STEM education, digital education, creativity and Gaeltacht education. These had been introduced in parallel with ongoing change at Junior Cycle, and the report expressed a concern that the capacity to implement such change at school level was finite. Since then, other initiatives have been initiated as necessary, including work on SPHE at post-primary level and a curriculum for Traveller History and Culture, and work on anti-bullying measures, which will also have an impact on the curriculum of schools.

Advances have been achieved in a number of these areas during the period covered by this report: development, pilot or project work has been underway in areas such science education, Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), Gaeltacht education, and education for sustainable development, and significant investments have been made in implementing the Digital Strategy. The roll-out of the Primary Language curriculum has proceeded, albeit after some revisions to the curriculum. Creativity in schools has been fostered by initiatives supported by Creative Ireland/Creative Youth. Curriculum development work has also advanced on Social Personal and Health Education (SPHE) and Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) and on Traveller History and Culture. At the time of writing, work had also commenced on the revision of anti-bullying measures for schools. Nevertheless, it remains the case that there is a limit on schools' capacity to absorb and implement curriculum and other changes and that dealing with the COVID-19 emergency absorbed almost entirely the capacity of school leaders to lead and monitor meaningful change.

The establishment by the Department of Education of the Primary Education Forum, where education stakeholders have been able to discuss the pace of such initiatives at primary level, has been very valuable. A collaborative approach with stakeholders also underpinned the work at post-primary level of the Advisory Group on State Examinations (that supported the delivery of Calculated Grades in 2020 and Accredited Grades in 2021). A similar collaborative approach was also used to address the challenges experienced in sustaining the operation of schools at both levels during the pandemic. Building on this level of stakeholder involvement would provide a strong basis for the sort of phasing needed for curriculum change in the future. So, too, could a carefully integrated and planned programme of curriculum change, in which adequate time is provided for the embedding of new practices by teachers and school leaders, and their monitoring through self-evaluation, inspection and research.

Gaeilge

The previous Chief Inspector's Report pointed to the unsatisfactory situation regarding aspects of the teaching and learning of Irish at primary and post-primary levels. Excellent progress has been achieved in implementing the Policy on Gaeltacht Education, with the vast majority of Gaeltacht schools joining the Gaeltacht School Recognition Scheme. Officials in the Department's Aonad um Oideachas Gaeltachta led this work while inspectors from the Department of Education and staff from An Chomhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta provided extensive on-the-ground support. An Irish-medium Bachelor of Education course for primary teachers has been established, the Postgraduate Masters in Education (PME) course for second-level teachers in Irish medium schools has been expanded, and a post-graduate Masters programme has been established for teachers and school leaders working in Irish-medium settings.

The evidence available so far suggests that Gaeltacht schools are benefitting from the professional development and additional teaching resources provided to them and are making considerable progress in ensuring that high quality educational provision is available through the medium of Irish in Gaeltacht areas. Collaboration with Gaeltacht communities and organisations and with other Government departments, through the Advisory Committee on Gaeltacht Education, appears to have been beneficial to the implementation of the Policy. The Inspectorate looks forward in the coming months and years to carrying out an evaluation of the work of schools seeking full recognition under the Gaeltacht School Recognition Scheme.

The accounts in Chapters 4 and 5 comment favourably on the standards of the teaching and learning of Irish in Irish-medium schools outside the Gaeltacht. Nevertheless, not all students outside the Gaeltacht

have the option of attending Irish-medium schools, particularly at post-primary level. It is to be welcomed, therefore, that, as this report was being finalised, the Minister for Education and her Department had commenced work on the development of a policy for Irish-medium schooling outside the Gaeltacht and were in the process of commissioning research to inform its writing. An Advisory Committee to ensure the involvement of stakeholders was also being established. Given the success of the approach adopted in the Gaeltacht, it would seem highly likely that a similar approach could be used to expand the availability of Irish-medium education and strengthen its quality. If pursued, the education system could take a very significant step to strengthening Irish language usage and vitality in this way.

The picture regarding Irish in English-medium schools over the course of this Chief Inspector's Report is less positive. A revised Irish curriculum for primary schools has been published as part of the integrated Primary Languages Curriculum (PLC) but, as discussed in Chapter 4 above, the implementation of the integrated PLC proved challenging for schools. Evidence from inspections suggests that when schools struggled with the revised curriculum, they prioritised the teaching of English in English-medium schools and Irish in Irish-medium schools. As a result, we have not seen a significant improvement, as yet, in the teaching of Irish at primary level in English-medium schools. The break in schooling arising from COVID-19 lockdowns has also had a negative impact, given that students did not have the same classroom opportunities to listen to, and develop competence in, the use of Irish.

At post-primary level, a diversified curriculum at two levels (at L1 for native speakers and students in Irish-medium schools, and at L2 for second language learners) was introduced as part of Junior Cycle reform. The rationale for this, set out in the 20-Year Strategy for Irish and the Policy on Gaeltacht Education, was to ensure that adequate learning opportunities and challenges were provided for the range of learners engaging with the language.

Work was commenced at the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) on a revision for the Leaving Certificate Irish course also, but this work was delayed, partly by the pandemic, and it is not due to reach a conclusion until late 2023. Different approaches have been advocated including parallel specifications at L1 and L2 (as used at Junior Cycle) and the provision of two separate subjects – such as Irish and Advanced Irish. Both solutions seek to address the range of language abilities of students; there has been concern for some time that the learning challenge provided to first language speakers of Irish by the Higher Level Irish specification is not on a par with that posed for first language speakers of English by the Higher Level English specification. Whatever the eventual outcome, it will be essential that students of all abilities have learning and assessment opportunities available to them that will enable them to demonstrate their competency in the language and have this competency accredited and rewarded appropriately.

11.4 Inclusion and diversity

Allocating resources to schools for special education needs provision

A number of very significant reforms in special education have been introduced in our system since the last Chief Inspector's Report. Perhaps of most importance was the introduction in 2017 of a new allocation model for special education needs teachers (SETs). This new model is designed to ensure a more equitable distribution of resources to schools with the greatest level of need, and perhaps most significantly, it removed the need for parents to seek a psychological assessment in order for their child to receive additional support. The model is rooted in the principle of autonomy for schools and recognises that schools are best placed to both identify the needs of children and to subsequently work to meet those needs. The evidence as set out in Chapter 6 of this report, indicates that most schools met the challenge of structuring support for students in a manner which is consistent with one of the key underpinning principles of the SET allocation mode; that which states that the child with the greatest level of need should receive the greatest level of support. Looking to the future, teachers at post-primary level in particular, who start as subject specialists will require additional support and training opportunities to ensure that their programmes of work can be differentiated appropriately to take account of the broad range of educational needs in their classrooms.

Better alignment between teaching and therapeutic supports: School Inclusion Model

The development of the School Inclusion Model and its roll out to schools in the HSE's Community Health Area Seven is another significant and welcome development in our education system. The School Inclusion Model, which seeks to ensure better alignment between teaching and therapeutic supports, potentially offers our system a blueprint for its future development given that it recognises the need to ensure a more joined up approach to the delivery of supports for children. It is unfortunate that some of the early momentum which was associated with the model, was lost arising from the redeployment of therapeutic supports to COVID-related tasks. The Inspectorate is keen to ensure that learning from schools' engagement with School Inclusion Model is identified and shared with other schools and this will be a focus of our work in the coming years.

Special schools and special classes

The Inspectorate published a number of important composite reports in the area of inclusion over the lifetime of this report. The 2020 report on the quality of provision for children with autism attending special classes in mainstream schools raised some significant issues for schools and for the system more broadly. In the context of Ireland's ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), and the possible implications of Section 24 (Part 2) in particular, it would be worthwhile for policy makers to examine if the current configuration of special classes is the most effective model to fully include all learners in school life. Specifically, if full inclusion or ultimate enrolment into mainstream classes is to be viewed as the index of success, the current system of special classes appears to be having limited success for many learners who enrol in a special class.

In looking to further developments and reforms which will apply to the delivery of supports for students with special educational needs, the Inspectorate awaits the completion of policy advice by the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) in relation to future provision in special schools and special classes. The NCSE's published interim policy advice in 2019, which points to the need for our school system to be structured in a more inclusive manner. In that regard, the Inspectorate is aware of the desirability of ensuring that the delivery of supports to our students with special educational needs aligns to the terms of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities.

Curriculum provision for children with special educational needs

From a curriculum perspective, the benefits of junior cycle reform have also been experienced by students with special educational needs. Facilitating students with more complex needs to pursue a junior cycle programme at level one or level two has proved to be very successful and rewarding for both students and teachers delivering the programmes. However, the success of the programme highlights the lack of a specific curriculum progression pathway from junior cycle into senior cycle for students with complex educational needs and accentuates the need for the development of senior cycle level one and level two programme.

Tackling educational disadvantage

As this report was being prepared for publication, additional schools were admitted into the DEIS programme. This is a welcome development for those schools and for their students who are most at risk of educational disadvantage. We know the DEIS programme works; the cumulative impact of the range of supports available to schools and to students has been positive in many aspects of the DEIS programme. There remain, however, some significant challenges. While retention of students in DEIS schools is better now than in previous years, further progress has been slow in this area. The greater availability of data and information in DEIS schools is a positive. However, through DEIS evaluations, the Inspectorate has identified the need to further develop the capacity of DEIS schools to use this data and information purposefully. This is most evident in post-primary schools' use of examination outcomes to identify trends and areas for improvement and to specifically tailor supports and teaching interventions for individual students.

Students at risk of underperformance

The effectiveness of schools in using student data to track children at risk of underperformance and to tailor educational interventions to address their needs is not just an issue in DEIS schools, but is relevant for the system as a whole. It is good that evidence from the OECD's PISA studies shows that we have a relatively low between-school difference in the performance of Irish students. However, PISA also shows that within schools, differences in the performance of students remain and that socio-economic background remains a significant factor in determining students' educational attainment, as well as their social and emotional skills and wellbeing. This makes it all the more important that schools identify, track and intervene appropriately to support students at risk of poor performance.

The granting of additional dedicated resources to schools through an expanded DEIS programme is a welcome policy response to this issue. The challenge for the schools, and those who advise and evaluate them, will be to ensure that the additional resources provided are targeted appropriately. Tailoring teaching and learning approaches and the wider curricular experience for students at risk of underperformance is challenging: professional development for teachers, adequate time for teacher collaboration, effective use of assessment, coherent planning within the school, and excellent leadership are all prerequisites.

Contribution of evaluation

The Inspectorate has focused on the quality of provision in DEIS schools in a more comprehensive manner in the period immediately following the publication of the Department's revised DEIS plan in 2017. The Inspectorate doubled the number of DEIS inspections and conducted some of these on a cross-sectoral basis resulting in more detailed system-level information being gathered and analysed. At the time of writing, a composite report on the quality of provision in DEIS schools arising from inspections conducted between 2017 and 2020 is in final preparation for publication.

The Inspectorate will continue to support schools in the DEIS programme to achieve better outcomes. The importance of highly effective leadership, governance and oversight in our schools is raised in Chapter 8 of this report. This is especially true in schools where our most vulnerable learners are to be found. The inspectorate's engagement with clusters of boards of management of DEIS schools and with the various school management bodies has been positively received and has proved to be beneficial in supporting boards in particular to develop a better understanding of their governance and oversight role of DEIS action planning for improvement. The Inspectorate will continue to provide this level of support and will focus, in particular, in supporting those schools which are new to DEIS.

11.5 Early years educators, teachers, setting and school leaders

The opening chapter of this Report has described how several initiatives have been taken, under the direction of the Department's Working Group and Advisory Group on Teacher Supply to increase the supply of teachers for schools. Research work, principally by the Department's Statistics Section, has given the Department a much clearer picture of the likely availability of newly qualified and other teachers and has assisted the planning of student teacher numbers at third level. The successful recruitment of student teachers into newly established or expanded teacher education programmes for Irish-medium teacher education programmes has been noted above, and several steps were made to enable graduates of specific subjects to re-train as teachers.

All of these initiatives will continue to be required in the years immediately ahead. While pupil numbers at primary level are now falling, this is not the case at post-primary level, where student numbers are expected to grow until 2024. It is also worth noting that improvements to pupil-teacher ratios occurred mainly at primary level, other than during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, if resources and personnel permit, it would be advisable to prioritise lower student-teacher ratios at post-primary level in the years ahead, particularly in view of the likely demands of Senior Cycle reform.

As discussed above in the section on early learning and care, very significant steps have been taken to identify and plan for improvements in the initial and continuing education of early years educators and in their terms and conditions of work. All of that is to be welcomed. This may help to address the recruitment challenges that are being experienced in that sector and which may grow if the proportion of young children availing of publicly funded ELC provision increases as expected.

Throughout the period covered by this report, the professional networks of schools principals and deputy principals (the Irish Primary Principals' Network at primary level and the National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals at post-primary level) and the Centre for School Leadership (CSL) continued to receive Departmental support. Both of the networks continued to provide a broad range of services to support the professional development and work of school principals while CSL developed frameworks that underpinned the commissioning of third level leadership programmes for existing and aspiring school leaders. The encouragement that all three provide for the formation and sustaining of professional networks among school leaders was vital during the COVID-19 crisis and will remain important as curriculum change occurs at primary and Senior Cycle levels.

The forthcoming publication of a Strategy for Initial Teacher Education by the Department is a very welcome development as it has the potential to bring a new level of coherence to the planning of teacher supply and to improving the quality of Irish teachers. The full integration of support services into a single school support service is also planned. It is hoped that some of the areas of teachers' practice that are identified through this report as requiring improvement can be addressed as these policies are implemented. In that regard, the establishment of a professorial chair in assessment in 2015, and the subsequent establishment of the Centre for Assessment Research, Policy and Practice in Education (CARPE) in Dublin City University are most welcome developments, bringing as they do the potential, over the medium term, to improve teachers' understanding of, and capacity to use, assessment within the teaching and learning process.

11.6 Governance and leadership in the school system

Two aspects of the governance of schooling and education are likely to require attention in the immediate and medium term. The first concerns the management and leadership of schools; the second concerns the need for coherence across the administration of the education system.

The governance of schools

The Irish school system is extraordinarily fortunate in the calibre of those who lead Irish schools and in the volunteerism evident among those who serve on the boards of management of over 4,000 schools throughout the country. Without the efforts that they make, the administration of the system would simply not be possible.

However, the current roles of school leaders and volunteer members of boards of management are unlikely to be sustainable into the future. While the vast majority of boards strive valiantly to administer and lead their schools, very many are not equipped to carry out the wide range of responsibilities assigned to them (and other employers), including strategic planning, financial management, procurement, human resources management and compliance with regulations, including those concerning health and safety, child protection and environmental protection. All of these responsibilities are necessary for the good governance of a school and the provision of a safe and healthy environment for learning and teaching. However, boards of management made up of volunteers, especially those in small primary schools, can feel that the range and burden of such tasks is excessive. When additional, and particularly more complex problems arise, such as managing large-scale capital expenditure or dealing with poorly performing staff or serious parental complaints, boards can simply be overwhelmed. Nationally organised management bodies can and do provide an important level of advice and support to individual boards of management but they are not equipped, nor do they have the authority, to carry out functions on behalf of individual local schools.

Inevitably, many of these duties land back on the desk of the school principal. In larger primary schools and in many post-primary schools, boards of management may have a greater spread of skills among board members and the principal may have greater opportunity to devolve tasks to promoted staff members. However, by relying on voluntary boards of management to be the sole administrative mechanism at local level for the vast majority of schools, we create an unsustainable workload for many, if not most, principals and we erode their ability to lead and improve teaching and learning in schools.

In summary, a significant revision is needed in the management of schools. Many of the functions currently carried out by boards of management and principals require a level of specialist expertise that could be provided more effectively and efficiently across numbers of schools and the Department has taken initiatives to support common procurement, to improve the financial management of schools, and to manage school building projects at local level. While the Department's shared governance pilot programme for primary schools has the potential to provide further solutions, it is acknowledged that the problem outlined here is complex, touching as it does on long-established structures and relationships. However, the experience coming from inspection, from principals' organisations, and from patrons who find recruitment of board members and principals increasingly challenging, points to the need for change in the way we administer Irish schools. Failure to address this issue will only lead to fewer candidates of ability seeking positions as school leaders and inevitably the quality of school leadership and educational provision in classrooms will suffer. Stronger collaborative working between the Department and stakeholders, including parents and students – already evident in the Primary Forum, the Advisory Group on State Examinations, and in the development of inspection practice discussed below – could assist greatly in finding a resolution to this issue.

Coherence across the administration of the education system

Irish children and young people move through different phases of provision during their educational journey – from early learning and care, to primary school, to Junior Cycle and Senior Cycle in post-primary schools, and as young adults, on to further and higher education. Evidence suggests that each transition point is a time of risk for the learner , when discontinuity in provision can create challenges and at times, even result in regression for the learner. Transition points can also be the time when older children begin to become disaffected and at risk of dropping out of the system entirely. This is why it is so important that we do everything possible to ensure continuity in curriculum provision and learning while at the same time, providing learning experiences that challenge and are age appropriate.

Since 2011, two government departments have shared responsibility for educational provision in the period from birth to adulthood; since 2020, a third department has been established in this area. The Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) has lead responsibility for the provision of early learning and care, the Department of Education has lead responsibility for education in schools and other settings up to the end of post-primary education, and the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science is responsible for tertiary education. All three have cross-cutting responsibilities. There are many advantages to having ministers, departments and officials with responsibility for specific phases of provision, not least the capacity it creates to focus on the complex challenges and the particular contexts of each phase of education. Indeed, a number of other educational systems have adopted various divisions of labour in the education sector from time to time.

It is important, however, that the needs of learners for coherence and continuity in their educational experience are borne in mind by all responsible for educational administration, teaching and learning. The Department of Education and its fellow Departments at early learning and care and tertiary education have a responsibility to create structures and working cultures that ensure coherence across the work of their Departments and in the work of their agencies and the settings, schools, colleges and other institutions that provide services to learners. The implementation of Senior Cycle reform, the development of complementary curricula for early learning and care and primary pupils, the provision of seamless supports for children with special educational needs as they move from phase to phase, the appropriate sharing and using of information about student progress from one level to the next, and the development of common teacher skills are just some examples of where such coordination in policy formation and implementation will be so important for young people in the years ahead.

11.7 Inspection and evaluation

Inspection practice developed through collaboration

As described in Chapter 2 above, the work and priority of the Inspectorate has evolved over the period to which this Chief Inspector's Report applies. Significantly, much of the change that occurred, such as the introduction of new Child Protection and Safeguarding Inspections, were deliberately co-developed with teachers, school leaders and other partners. The Inspectorate is committed to continuing with this collaborative approach to the development of its work in the years ahead.

Student Voice and Parent Voice

As signalled in the previous Chief Inspector's Report, the Inspectorate adopted a strongly collaborative approach, supported by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs and later the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, to facilitating and supporting much greater use of Student Voice and Parent Voice in its work since 2016. This will continue to be a core theme in the period to come: for example, at the time of writing, the launch is anticipated of a range of multi-media materials to support young people to engage fully with inspection teams. The engagement of the Inspectorate in this development, has had a wider impact: the Inspectorate has also been asked to help deepen the Department of Education's engagement with young people in its policy making and implementation across a range of areas.

Forthcoming inspection programmes

As described in earlier chapters, during 2020 and 2021, inspection and advisory work had to be rapidly adjusted to cope with the effects of the pandemic and to support the school and early learning and care systems in a number of ways. As schools and settings return to more normal working conditions, the Inspectorate plans to build up the range of inspection approaches we use to evaluate practice and encourage improvement. Our Strategic Plan that covers the period to 2024 commits us to doing this, conscious of the impact that COVID-19 has had on teaching and learning, and on the capacity of early years educators, teachers and school and setting leaders who have had to respond to an extraordinarily demanding period.

Developments in the evaluation of early learning and care provision

In line with the commitments in First 5, we will be extending our education inspections in ELC settings to cover provision from birth to six years. We will also be working closely with the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, who have lead responsibility for early learning and care, and with colleagues in the Tusla Early Years Inspectorate, to improve and simplify quality assurance within the early learning and care sector, informed by the recommendation in the OECD report on Strengthening Early Childhood Education and Care.

Themes in school evaluation

Specific themes will be evident in our work in schools. Some of these arise from the need to monitor the implementation of the Department's policy priorities and to support schools in their implementation. These include evaluation and advisory work to support schools' efforts in fostering student wellbeing, and in creating effective safeguarding and anti-bullying climates. We will be carrying out a major programme of advisory visits and evaluations in schools within the Gaeltacht School Recognition Scheme and follow-up evaluations to monitor progress in the implementation of the Languages Strategy and the STEM strategy.

Evaluations at Junior Cycle level are planned to monitor the progress of curriculum change and effectiveness at that level, now that the full range of revised Junior Cycle subjects is in place.

A particular focus for us in the period covered by this report and one that will continue in the period to come will be evaluations of provision for more vulnerable learners: children with special educational needs, refugee and migrant children, pupils/students in DEIS schools, and, in conjunction with the Inspector of Prisons, the quality of adult education for prisoners.

Developments in school self-evaluation

We also plan to take further steps to re-vitalise and develop school self-evaluation (SSE). A consultation on a new phase of SSE will be held in 2022 and it is hoped that good self-reflective practice will be evident in the phased roll-out of curriculum change and other initiatives. A particularly interesting development, which was planned for 2020 and postponed because of the pandemic, will be the development and trial of Collaborative Evaluation for Learning, in which it is proposed to involve inspectors as well as senior teachers and the school leader in a collaborative evaluation team. It is envisaged that the team would evaluate an element of the school's own practice – possibly as part of the school's self-evaluation process. The objective will be to grow the expertise of school leaders and staff in self-evaluation and at the same time, to enable inspectors to better understand the evolving challenges facing school leaders.

Our support for the Department's policy formation

During the period ahead, the Inspectorate will continue to work with colleagues in various sections of the Department of Education and with colleagues in the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth to assist in policy formulation and implementation. Key areas in which we anticipate supporting the Department of Education and Ministers include curriculum and assessment policy, social inclusion policy, special needs education, teacher education, Gaeltacht and Irish-medium education, school governance and school improvement. We also anticipate continuing to work closely with colleagues in the Early Years Education Policy Unit co-located between both Departments.

Quality assurance of inspection

Finally, it is worth noting that the Inspectorate also plans to enhance the evaluation of its own work through improving its arrangements for the internal quality assurance of its inspection work and by involving other inspectorates and other relevant experts to provide an external perspective of our effectiveness. In this way, we will build on our existing quality assurance mechanisms. Our aim will be to continue to offer a high quality evaluation and advisory service to settings and schools, to our colleagues in the Department, and to Ministers and the wider public so that the quality of educational provision for Ireland's children and young people is assured.planning resource, developed by the Junior Cycle for Teachers (JCT), to plan units of learning that had a focus on developing students' skills rather than on just covering content.

Appendix 1:
Participation in committees and working groups

In the 2016 to 2020 period, members of the Inspectorate participated in a wide range of committees and working groups, including those overseen by the following State departments, organisations, agencies or initiatives:

Active School Flag

An Chomhairle Um Oideachas Gaeltachta agus Gaelscolaíochta (COGG)

BT Young Scientist

Centre for School Leadership (CSL)

City Connects

Community National Schools

Council of Europe

Creative Youth/Creative Ireland

Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) (now Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY))

Department of Education (DoE) – a wide range of planning and steering groups, sub committees and interdepartmental working groups, for example:

- Teacher Supply Implementation Group
- Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) Education Steering Group
- Section 29 Appeal Committees
- Visiting Teacher Service for Children who are Deaf/Hard of Hearing or Blind/Visually Impaired (VTHVI)
- Guidance Counselling Supervision Committee
- Leadership Working Group

Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) e.g. Holocaust Education, Research and Remembrance Standing Committee

Department of Health e.g. Disability Consultative Committee - National Disability Inclusion Strategy (NDIS)

Department of Justice (and Equality) e.g. Traveller Education Advisory and Consultative Forum; National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy (NTRIS) Steering Group

Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (now Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sports and Media) e.g. Official Language Act Network; National Famine Commemoration Committee

Education Support Centres Ireland (ESCI)

Education, Engagement, Experience (E3) Project, Trinity College Dublin

Educational Research Centre (ERC)

European Centre for Modern Languages (ECML), Council of Europe

European Union Intellectual Property Office (EUIPO)

Junior Cycle for Teachers (JCT)

Léargas

Music Generation

National Centre for Guidance in Education (NCGE)

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA)

National Council for Special Education (NCSE)

National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS)

Oberstown Detention Campus

Office of the Secretary General of the European Schools e.g. Board of Governors of the European Schools

Partnership Schools Ireland (PSI)

Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST)

State Examinations Commission (SEC)

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) e.g. The NESLI Network; Centre for Educational Research and Innovation (CERI) Working Group

The Teaching Council

Young Social Innovators

Appendix 2:
Presentations

In the 2016 to 2020 period, the Inspectorate delivered presentations relating to inspection and also on educational policy and practice at national and international conferences, including those organised by the following organisations:

Association for the Management of Catholic Secondary Schools (AMCSS)

Association of Community and Comprehensive Schools (ACCS)

Association of Post-Primary Diocesan Advisers

Association of Secondary Teachers, Ireland (ASTI)

Association of Teachers of Spanish (ATS)

Business Studies Teachers' Association of Ireland (BSTAI)

Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI)

Education and Training 2020 (ET2020), European Commission

French Inspectorate

Gaeloideachas

Inspectorate Child Protection and Safeguarding Inspection Seminars

Institute of Guidance Counsellors

Irish Association of Teachers in Special Education (IATSE)

Irish Learning Support Association (I.L.S.A.)

Irish Primary Principals' Network (IPPN)

Joint Managerial Body (JMB)

Junior Cycle for Teachers (JCT)

Kerry Education and Training Board

Mary Immaculate College, Limerick

Mayo Education Centre

National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals (NAPD) (Regional)

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA)

National Council for Special Education (NCSE)

National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS)

Network of School Planners, Ireland (NSPI)

Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST)

Society of Music Education Ireland (SMEI)

Standing International Conference of Inspectorates (SICI)

The Centre for Evaluation, Quality and Inspection, Dublin City University (DCU)

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)

Trinity College Dublin (TCD)

Tusla Education Support Service (TESS)

University College Cork (UCC)

University College Dublin (UCD)

Visiting Teacher Service for Children who are Deaf/Hard of Hearing or Blind/Visually Impaired (VTHVI)

Appendix 3:
Engagement with visiting delegations

In the 2016 to 2020 period, the IInspectorate hosted seminars and study visits and delivered presentations to a range of visiting Inspectorates and education delegations, including the following:

Standing Conference of International Inspectorates (SICI)

Education delegation from America

Education delegation from Austria

Education delegation from China

Education delegation from Iceland

Education delegation from Korea

Education Inspectorate, Norway

Education delegation from Singapore

Education delegation from Uganda

Education Inspectorate, Zanzibar

External Evaluation Department, Department of Education and Research, Estonia

Inspectorate of Education, the Basque Region

Inspectorate, Lille Educational Authority

Lithuanian Evaluation Agency

National School Inspectorate, Moldova

Northern Ireland Education and Training Inspectorate

OECD NESLI Network

The Cambodian Ministry of Education

Appendix 4: Inspectorate publications

In the 2016 to 2020 period, the Inspectorate published a range of documents, including quality frameworks, guides to inspection, reports of thematic and composite evaluations and research reports. It also published a number of webinars.

Quality frameworks

Looking at Our School 2016: A Quality Framework for Post-primary Schools

Looking at Our School 2016: A Quality Framework for Primary Schools

Guides and guidelines

A Guide to Child Protection and Safeguarding Inspections

A Guide to Inspection in Post-Primary Schools

A Guide to Inspection in Primary Schools

Guide to Early Years Education Inspection (EYEI)

School Self-Evaluation Guidelines 2016-2020 - Primary

School Self-Evaluation Guidelines 2016-2020- Post-primary

Thematic reports: Special education

Review of the Pilot of a New Model for Allocating Teaching Resources to Mainstream Schools to Support Pupils with SEN

Educational Provision for Learners with Autism Spectrum Disorder in Special Classes Attached to Mainstream Schools in Ireland

Evaluation of the Support Teacher project

Evaluation of Provision for Students with Additional and Special Educational Needs in Post-Primary Schools

Findings of Joint Inspectorate and NEPS Visits to Education Settings in Emergency Reception and Orientation Centres (EROCs)

Review of education provision in schools attached to CAMHS units

Thematic reports: National priorities

Modern Foreign Languages: A Report on the Quality of Practice in Post-Primary Schools

STEM Education 2020: Reporting on Practice in Early Learning and Care, Primary and Post-Primary Contexts

Digital Learning 2020: Reporting on practice in Early Learning and Care, Primary and Post-Primary Contexts

Research reports: COVID-19

Resumption of schooling Autumn 2020: Report on analysis of data from principals

Return to school: Summary of research September - December 2020

Return to school: Report on analysis of data from principals, October and November 2020

Return to school: Report on focus groups with pupils and students, September and October 2020

Return to school: Report on focus groups with pupils and students, November 2020

Return to school: Report on findings of surveys in primary schools, post-primary and special schools, October 2020

Return to school: Report on findings of surveys in primary schools and special schools, December 2020

Return to School: Report on findings of surveys in post-primary schools, December 2020

Early Years

A Review of Early Years Education Focused Inspection: April 2016 – June 2017

Insights Webinars – Quality in Early Years Education

Gaeltacht Education

Guide to Inspections of Courses in Irish-Language Colleges (Coláistí Gaeilge)

Guides for Gaeltacht Schools on Inspectorate Advisory Visits/Sessions for schools participating in the Gaeltacht School Recognition Scheme (published annually)

Preliminary Report to Inform the Development of a Policy for the Irish-medium Sector Outside of the Gaeltacht: Irish-medium primary schools outside of the Gaeltacht: what inspectors had to say

Preliminary Report to Inform the Development of a Policy for the Irish-medium Sector Outside of the Gaeltacht: Irish-medium post-primary schools outside of the Gaeltacht: what inspectors had to say

Report on Case-Study Schools participating in the Gaeltacht School Recognition Scheme (Inspectorate in collaboration with the Educational Research Centre

Schools participating in the Gaeltacht School Recognition Scheme: Key Messages from Inspectorate Advisory Visits

Other

Continuity of Guidance Counselling - Guidelines for schools providing online support for students

Standardised Achievement Tests: An Analysis of the Results at Primary School Level for 2011-12 and 2012-13

Appendix 5:
Contribution to other publications

During the 2016 to 2020 period, the Inspectorate closely supported or made substantial contributions to the development of the following Department publications:

Continuity of schooling

Guidance on Continuity of Schooling for Primary Schools and Post-primary Schools

Guidance on Continuity of Schooling for Primary Schools

Guidance on Continuity of Schooling: Supporting Students at Risk of Educational Disadvantage- For primary schools (updated January 2021)

Guidance on Continuity of Schooling: Supporting Students at Risk of Educational Disadvantage- For post-primary schools (updated January 2021)

Guidance on Continuity of Schooling: Supporting students with Special Educational Needs- For primary schools (Updated January 2021)

Guidance on Continuity of Schooling: Supporting Students with Special Educational Needs for post-primary schools (updated January 2021)

Guidance on Continuity of Schools: Supporting Learners in Youthreach Centres

Continuity of Schooling: Guidance for parents/guardians of primary school pupils

Remote Learning

Guidance on Remote Learning in a COVID-19 Context: September – December 2020 for primary schools and special schools

Guidance on Remote Learning in a COVID-19 Context: September – December 2020 for post-primary schools and centres for education

Return to School- Guidance for primary schools

Returning to school Curriculum guidance for primary school leaders and teachers

Primary Curriculum Guidance – Frequently Asked Questions

Guidance on Remote Learning in a COVID-19 Context: September – December 2020

Continuity of schooling: Supporting primary pupils who are at very high risk to COVID-19

Supporting collaboration with parents in primary schools

Return to School- Guidance for post-primary schools

Returning to school: Guidance on learning and school programmes for post primary school leaders and teachers

Returning to School Transition Year 2020/21 (Additional summary published August 2021)

Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) Advice for management and teachers of LCA 2020/21

Guidance on Emergency Remote Teaching and Learning in a COVID-19 Context

Return to School Guidance for Practical Subjects in Post-Primary Schools and Centres for Education (March 2021) First published August 2020

Continuity of schooling: Supporting post primary students who are at very high risk to COVID-19

Supporting collaboration with parents/guardians of Post-Primary students School Year 2020/2021

Gaeltacht Education

Gaeltacht Education Policy 2017-2022

Irish-medium E-Hub Pilot Project - International Review and Advisory Report

Guide for Gaeltacht Post-Primary Schools: Indicators of Good Practice for Immersion Education

Guide for Gaeltacht Primary Schools: Indicators of Good Practice for Immersion Education

Guidance for a Home-Based Summer Programme to Support Children with Special Educational Needs

Guidance for a School-Based Summer Programme to Support Children with Special Educational Needs

School-Based Summer Programme to Support Children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) -A Guidance Webinar for Staff

In the 2016 to 2020 period, the Inspectorate contributed to the following publications:

Education Matters Yearbook

Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI) Journal of Education

Irish Primary Principals' Network (IPPN) Leadership +

Appendix 6:
Inspectorate Staff at 31 December 2020

Chief Inspector

Harold Hislop

Deputy Chief Inspectors

Yvonne Keating

Gary Ó Donnchadha

Assistant Chief Inspectors

Declan Cahalane

Suzanne Conneely

Brendan Doody

Maresa Duignan

Mary Gilbride

Treasa Kirk

Martin Lally

Pádraig Mac Fhlannchadha

Brian Mac Giolla Phádraig

Orlaith O'Connor

Senior Post-primary Inspectors

Siobhán Broderick

Gráinne Conachy

Ann Daly (Acting)

Carmel Donoghue

Gavin Doyle (Acting)

Rebecca Galligan (Acting)

Amanda Geary

Aisling Kearney

Jason Kelly

Maria Lorigan

Noreen McMorrow

Nóra Nic Aodha

Jacqueline Ní Fhearghusa

Eibhlín Ní Scannláin

Catherine O'Carroll

Colm Ó Murchú (Acting)

Kevin O'Donovan

Liz O'Neill

Lynda O'Toole

Ger Power

Linda Ramsbottom

Tony Weir

Post-primary Inspectors

Siobhán Aherne

Niamh Barry

Charlene Brazil

Freda Byrne

Anthony Carty

William Donnelly

Esther Doyle

Sinead Greene

Julia Lynch

Gary McConway

Frances Moss

Shirley Murphy

Niamh Murray

Kenneth Nally

Ailbhíne Ní Bhroin

Helen Ní Chatháin

Bernadette Ní Ruairc

Seán P Ó Briain

Micheál Ó Caoilte

Fintan O Mahony

Caroline O'Shea

Brendan O Sullivan

Deborah Quigley

Elizabeth Smith

Michelle VictorByrne

Laura Walsh

Lisa White

Susan White

Primary Divisional Inspectors

Micheál Báicéir

Eamon Clavin

Ursula Cotter

Mary Culhane

Diarmuid Dullaghan

Margaret Dunning

Noreen Fiorentini

John Fitzgerald

Amanda Grant

Clare Griffin

Karina Holton

Maria McCarthy

Teresa McSorley

Edel Meaney

John Mescal

Caitríona Ní Bhriain

Niamh Ní Fhoighil

Máire Ní Mháirtín

Carmel O'Doherty

Peadar Ó Muirí

Eileen O'Sullivan

Gerard Quirke

Fiona Rushe

Elizabeth Sheridan

Paul Stevens

Caitríona Uí Ghrianna

Martin Whyte

Primary District Inspectors

Noreen Bambury

Christina Casserly

Barbara Collins

Edel Corcoran

Nicholas Cosgrave

Mary Dunne

Padraig Fahey

Margaret Farren

Anne Fitzpatrick

Stephanie Fitzpatrick

Kay Foley

Sinéad Ginnane

Elaine Hyland

Úna Kingston

Catherine King

Dara Mannion

Maria McGrath

Joanne NíBhaoill

Saundra Ní Chíosóig

Lena Ní Dhuinn

Fiona Ní Mheachair

Yvonne Ní Mhurchú

Seán Ó Briain

Eavan O' Donoghue

Sinead Patten

Jean Pender

Niamh Quinn

Mary Regan

Claire Reidy

Michael Ryan

Catherine Treacy

Senior Early Years Inspectors

Martina Carter

Monica Cassidy

Early Years Inspectors

Catherine Cullen

Edel Condon

Triona Connor

Imelda Duffy

Ulrike Falcini

Barbara Gavagan

Jillian Halpin

Jennifer Henson

Bríd Hickey

Sandra Hora

Elaine Hynes

Aishling Kelly

Aisling O'Loughlin

Administrative staff

Higher Executive Officer

Deirdre Reid

Executive Officers

Celine Conlon

John O'Leary

Clerical Officers

Frieda Cooper

John Drumm

Bernie Flannery

Roisín Foy

Ciara Heffernan

Craig Kelly

Mark Meleady

Bernie McGrillen

Margaret O'Grady

Joanne O'Sullivan

Career Breaks and Secondments

Muireann Ní Mhóráin,
Senior Inspector

Leo Kilroy,
Divisional Inspector