



Initial education policy responses to the COVID-19 pandemic: Ireland

Strengthening adaptability and resilience in the context of COVID-19

Initial evidence suggests that pre-existing resources in the education system facilitated areas of Ireland's early response to the pandemic. A well-established evaluation culture seems to have enabled the DES to mobilise a rapid initial survey of school-level actions and help ascertain needs. Furthermore, the promotion of student wellbeing over recent years may have helped schools direct needed attention to this area during the crisis. Through the Digital Strategy for Schools (2015-20), online learning support tools were already in place, yet survey responses and PISA 2018 evidence suggest more support will be needed, especially for teachers' digital skills. As Ireland works to balance short-term responsiveness with longer-term strategic aims, priorities evolve. As elsewhere, disruption to student assessment has been considerable, prompting more reliance on teacher assessment of student learning. This forces an acceleration of ongoing efforts to balance continuous and summative assessment. Ireland should continue to engage stakeholders on the topic, drawing out lessons from this experience to inform the future implementation of assessment reforms.

This snapshot presents information originally published as part of the **Education Policy Outlook: Ireland (2020)**, available at: www.oecd.org/education/policy-outlook/country-profile-Ireland-2020.pdf



The Irish education system's initial response to the COVID-19 pandemic

On 12 March, Ireland [announced the closure](#) of all schools, preschools, and further and higher education settings, with immediate effect. Initial responses in light of the work of the *Education Policy Outlook* in 2020 in the context of this pandemic are:

1. **Ensuring continued access to learning and smooth educational pathways:** To support digital learning, schools and families received free access to [Scoilnet](#) (1998), the DES' online portal with over 20 000 educational resources. The Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST) created a resource bank including online courses, reliable websites and tools to support online teaching. The Junior Cycle for Teachers expanded its bank of online webinars and resources for teachers. In FET, the Education and Training Boards (ETBs) provided resources, tools and support for educators and some online learning. Leaving Certificate written examinations were postponed to late summer and Junior Cycle examinations were cancelled and replaced with school-based assessment at the end of the school year and a State certificate of completion. Practical and oral examinations scheduled during closures were cancelled and candidates awarded full marks; others were postponed. At tertiary level, teaching continued online and alternative examination arrangements were introduced - including online assessment, remote assessment or postponement - in line with [guidance from Quality and Qualifications Ireland](#) (2020). At both levels, these decisions were taken following ongoing discussions with relevant stakeholders.
2. **Strengthening the internal world of the student:** In line with Ireland's previous efforts to value student wellbeing, the DES promoted tailored support offered to students, families and teachers by the National Educational Psychological Service. This included guidance and advice for staying well during confinement, tools to help establish daily routines and techniques for relaxation. Student counselling services in the tertiary sector remained available on a remote basis, as did adult guidance counselling.
3. **Providing targeted support and interventions for vulnerable children and families:** Schools continued to provide free school meals (breakfast and lunch) to children already receiving them, including during the Easter school holidays. To respect confinement measures, many delivered weekly food packages to families. Through the [Temporary Assignment programme](#) (2020), special educational needs staff no longer required for direct instruction were redistributed to a priority area suited to their skills, principally, community services for disabled and other vulnerable children. Ireland committed EUR 10 million to enable schools to purchase [digital equipment for disadvantaged students](#), initially targeting examination candidates. Higher education institutions had full flexibility to allocate their Student Assistance Fund as necessary, to support specific students. Also, a multi-stakeholder working group on Mitigating Educational Disadvantage in higher education was established to inform responses in three key areas: financial support to students, ensuring access to technology and maintaining counselling.
4. **Harnessing wider support and engagement at local and central level:** A national, multi-sectoral stakeholder forum of representatives from over 120 organisations has been meeting regularly to discuss government responses to the pandemic, offer sector-level insights and assist the communication of key messages. Local authorities coordinated Community Support Network Programmes to bring together local volunteer efforts; county-level Community Champions would oversee this work. They mainly act in the health and social care sectors, but the DES directed schools to access these groups for support where relevant.
5. **Collecting, disseminating and improving the use of information about students:** Ireland coordinated an initial data collection of school-level responses and needs. The DES Inspectorate conducted a telephone survey of school principals, while the ETBs surveyed the post-primary sector and Maynooth University surveyed primary schools. Informed by these responses, the DES published official [Guidance on the Continuity of Schooling](#) (2020) for educators. The DES also proceeded to collate information from tertiary institutions. The ETBs were surveyed regarding contingency plans for the FET sector.



Table 1

Selected indicators of system readiness (OECD)		Ireland	Average	Min	Max
<i>Students' readiness (according to students' self-reports in PISA 2018)</i>					
1	Index of self-efficacy	-0.04	0.01	-0.61	0.36
2	Percentage of students in disadvantaged schools with access to a computer at home that they can use for school work	80.1%	81.5%	23.5%	96.5%
<i>Schools' readiness (according to principals' reports in PISA 2018)</i>					
3	Percentage of students in schools with an effective online learning support platform available	45.4%	54.1%	23.9%	90.9%
4	Percentage of students in schools whose teachers have the technical and pedagogical skills to teach with digital devices	49.3%	64.6%	27.3%	84.1%

Note: The information presented in this spotlight covers key measures announced or introduced **before 03 May 2020**.

For more information visit: <http://www.oecd.org/education/policy-outlook/>

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