OECD Review of Resourcing Schools to Address Educational Disadvantage in Ireland

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Foreword

This OECD Review of Resourcing Schools to Address Educational Disadvantage in Ireland was conducted as part of OECD Education for Inclusive Societies project (see Annex A for further details). The purpose of the review is to assist Irish authorities in identifying ways to improve support provided to students at risk of educational disadvantage in both DEIS and non-DEIS schools in the education system. This is also an area of high priority highlighted in the 2022 OECD Ministerial Declaration on "Building Equitable Societies Through Education".

Ireland was one of the countries that opted to participate in the country review strand of the project and host a visit by an external review team. Members of the OECD review team were Lucie Cerna (OECD), co-ordinator of the review; Luka Boeskens (OECD); Cecilia Mezzanotte (OECD); Samo Varsik (OECD); and Ides Nicaise (KU Leuven, Belgium). The biographies of the members of the review team are provided in Annex B. This publication is the report from the review team. It provides, from an international perspective, an independent analysis of major issues facing support to students at risk of educational disadvantage in Ireland, current policy initiatives and possible future approaches.

The report serves three purposes: i) to provide insights and advice to Irish education authorities; ii) to help other countries understand the Irish approach to equitable education; and iii) to provide input for comparative analyses of the OECD Education for Inclusive Societies project. The scope for the analysis in this report covers primary and post-primary (secondary) education. The focus areas of the review in Ireland are: i) governance, ii) resourcing; iii) capacity building; iv) school-level interventions and v) monitoring and evaluation. Among student groups, the Irish authorities have requested to focus on students at risk of educational disadvantage, and students from Traveller and Roma communities. The analysis presented in the report refers to the situation faced by the education system in 2023, when the review team visited Ireland (virtually in spring 2023 and in-person in fall 2023). The most recent educational data used in this report reflects the situation during the 2022/23 school year though some data presented are older.

Ireland's involvement in the OECD review was coordinated by multiple staff members in the Department of Education. The National Co-ordinator was Micheál Killilea, Assistant Principal Officer in the Social Inclusion Unit at the Department of Education. He was supported by Social Inclusion Unit colleagues; Grainne Cullen, Principal Officer; Ryan McKay, Assistant Principal Officer; Joe Briscoe, Higher Executive Officer; Karen Menton, Higher Executive Officer and Stephen Corley, Executive Officer. Maria Lorigan and Gerard Quirke of the Department of Education Inspectorate supported the team during the country visit.

A number of units across the Department of Education and other Government departments provided their time to the review team throughout the process, including informing and contributing to the report.

Thank you to Bernie McNally, Secretary General of the Department of Education and the Management Board; Yvonne Keating, Chief Inspector of the Department of Education; Anne Tansey, Director of the National Educational Psychological Service; Paul Alexander, Principal Officer Statistics Unit; Brendan Doody, Principal Officer Special Educational Needs Policy Section; Jill Fannin, Principal Officer Teacher Education and Professional Development section; Áine O'Keeffe, Director Tusla Education Support Service; Lorraine Gilleece, Research Fellow at the Educational Research Centre, officials from their teams

and the many other officials across the department and its aegis bodies who provided us with information. Thank you also to the officials from the Department of Children Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, Department of Social Protection, Department of Taoiseach and other Government Departments who assisted in the completion of the review.

The OECD and the European Commission (EC) have established a partnership that partly covers participation costs of countries which are part of the European Union's Erasmus+ programme. The participation of Ireland was organised with the support of the EC in the context of this partnership.[1] This report is also the first one which is part of the initiative of the Education Council "Learning Lab on Investing in Quality Education and Training". The EC was part of the planning process of the review of Ireland (participating in the visits and providing feedback on the planning of the review visit) and offered comments on drafts of this report. The involvement of the EC was coordinated by Sylwia Sitka, Policy Officer for Ireland and Poland in the European Commission's Education, Youth, Sport and Culture Directorate-General (DG EAC). The review team is grateful to Sylwia Sitka for her contribution to the planning of the review and for the helpful comments she provided on drafts of this report.

The (virtual) preliminary visit review visit to Ireland took place between 27 June and 26 July 2023 and the in-person review and school visits in Ireland took place between 18 and 22 September 2023. The itinerary is provided in Annex C. The visit was designed by the OECD (with input and participation from the EC) in collaboration with the Irish authorities.

The review team met with officials from the Department of Education and its associated units; officials from other departments; representatives of national educational guidance bodies; school management board representative bodies; national school teachers' and principals' unions and associations; national parents' associations; teachers' professional learning providers, in-service training centres; civil society organisations with an interest in children; and researchers with an interest in equity and inclusion in education. The team visited six schools in different counties (Dublin, Limerick and Offaly), interacting with principals, teachers, non-teaching staff, parents and students at each school. The six schools selected for the main visit were chosen from a set of pre-specified geographic, demographic and performance criteria established by the OECD review team. The intention was to provide the review team with a broad cross-section of information and opinions on inclusive education. Overall, the OECD review team held 36 meetings with approximately 60 stakeholders, including six schools serving 2 890 students.

The OECD review team wishes to express its gratitude to the many people who gave time from their busy schedules to inform the review team of their views, experiences and knowledge. The meetings were open and provided a wealth of insights. Special gratitude is due to the National Co-ordinator, Michéal Killilea, for his commitment and efforts to provide the review team with the best possible conditions for this work, and his willingness to respond to numerous questions throughout the review process. The courtesy and hospitality extended to us throughout our visit in Ireland made our task as a review team as enjoyable as it was challenging.

The OECD review team is also grateful to colleagues at the OECD, especially Hannah Borhan for research and editorial support, and Charlotte Baer for publication support. Daiana Torres Lima provided key administrative and layout support. Paulo Santiago, Head of the Policy Advice and Implementation Division, provided overall guidance and key feedback on the report.

This report is organised into six chapters. Chapter 1 provides the national context, with information on equity and inclusion in the Irish school system. Chapter 2 analyses the governance of policies to address educational disadvantage, while Chapter 3 examines the resourcing of schools to address educational disadvantage. Chapter 4 reviews capacity building for schools to address educational disadvantage in the

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[1] This document has been produced with the financial assistance of the European Union. The views expressed herein can in no way be taken to reflect the official opinion of the European Union.

Irish school system. Chapter 5 examines school-level interventions to address educational disadvantage. Finally, Chapter 6 reviews monitoring and evaluation to address educational disadvantage. Chapters 2 to 6 each present strengths, challenges and policy recommendations.

The policy recommendations attempt to build on and strengthen policies and practices on equitable education that are already underway in Ireland, and the strong commitment to further improvement that was evident among those the OECD review team met. The suggestions should take into account the difficulties that face any visiting group, no matter how well briefed, in grasping the complexity of Ireland's education system and fully understanding all the issues. This report is, of course, the responsibility of the OECD review team. While the team benefited greatly from Ireland's Country Background Report and other documents, as well as the many discussions with a wide range of Irish personnel, any errors or misinterpretations in this report are its responsibility.

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Abbreviations and acronyms

AIM	Access and Inclusion Model
AEARS	Alternative Education Assessment and Registration Services
ALC	Area Learning Communities
AON	Assessment of Need
ASTI	Association of Secondary Teachers in Ireland
CAMHS	Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services
CES	Comprehensive Employment Strategy
CoPs	Communities of Practice
COVID	Coronavirus disease
CPL	Continuing Professional Learning
CPS P	Counselling in Primary Schools Pilot
CRPD	Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
CSL	Centre for School Leadership
CSO	Central Statistics Office
DCEDIY	Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth
DEIS	Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools
DFHERIS	Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science
DID	Difference in Differences method
DoE	Department of Education
DRCD	Department of Rural and Community Development
DSP	Department of Social Protection
ECCE	Early Childhood Care and Education programme
ECEC	Early Childhood Education and Care
ELET	Early Leaving from Education and Training
EPV	Extra Personal Vacation
ERC	Educational Research Centre
EROC	Emergency Orientation and Reception Centres
ESCI	Educational Support Centres Ireland
ESCS	Economic, Social and Cultural Status
ESRI	Economic and Social Research Institute
ETB	Education and Training Board
EU	European Union
EUR	Euro
EWS	Educational Welfare Service
FE	Further Education
FSM	Free School Meals
FTE	Full-time equivalent
FWP	Family Work Plan
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
HAPPEE	Health Alliances for Practice-Based Professional Education and Engagement
HE	Higher Education
HEA	Higher Education Authority
HP Index	Pobal Haase Pratschke Index

HSCL	Home School Community Liaison
HSE	Health Service Executive
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
IEP	Individual Education Plan
ILE	Irish Language Requirement
IPAS	International Protection Accommodation Services
IPPN	Irish Primary Principals' Network
ISCED	International Standard Classification of Education
ISLA	International Large-Scale Assessment
ITE	Initial Teacher Education
IYTCM	Incredible Years Teacher Classroom Management Programme
JCE	Junior Certificate Examinations
JCT	Junior Cycle for Teachers
LAOS	Looking at Our School framework
LCA	Leaving Certificate Applied
NAMER	National Assessments in Mathematics and English Reading
NAPD	National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
NCEA	National Certificate of Educational Achievement (New Zealand)
NCSE	National Council for Special Education
NDP	National Development Plan
NEIC MDT	North East Inner City Multi-Disciplinary Team
NEPS	National Educational Psychological Service
NEWB	National Education Welfare Board
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NIPT	National Induction Programme for Teachers
NQT	Newly Qualified Teacher
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
OPS	Overall Performance Scale
PATH	Programme for Access to Higher Education
PDST	Professional Development Service for Teachers
PIRLS	Progress in International Reading Literacy Study
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
PLC	Professional Learning Communities
PLL	Professional Learning Leaders
PME	Professional Master of Education
POD	Primary Online Database
PPOD	Post-primary Online Database
PPSN	Personal Service Number
PST	Professional Support Teams
REGALE	Regional Capacity for Adult Learning and Education
RSD	Reduced School Day
RTT	Resource Teachers for Travellers
SAs	Small Areas
SCP	School Completion Programme
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
SEF	School Excellence Fund
SEN	Special Education Needs
SES	Socioeconomic Status
SMART	Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Time-bound
SMP	School Meals Programme
SSE	School Self-Evaluation
STAR	Supporting Traveller and Roma project
STEM	Science, technology, engineering, and mathematics
TALIS	OECD Teacher and Learning International Survey

TESS	Tusla Educational Support Service (formerly Education Welfare Service)
TGA	Teachers' Groups and Associations
TIMSS	Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study
TPL	Teacher Professional Learning
TPN	Teacher Professional Networks
TUSLA	The Child and Family Agency (Irish: *An Ghníomhaireacht um Leanaí agus an Teaghlach*)
TY	Transition Year
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNESCO	United Nation Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
US	United States
USD	United States Dollar
VC	Voluntary Contribution

Executive summary

This OECD Review of Resourcing Schools to Address Educational Disadvantage in Ireland was conducted as part of the OECD Education for Inclusive Societies project. It analyses the allocation of resources to support students at risk of educational disadvantage in Ireland, particularly in relation to the Delivering Equality of Opportunity In Schools (DEIS) programme. Since 2005, the programme has been the Irish Department of Education's (DoE) main policy initiative to respond to educational disadvantage.

Key findings

Ireland demonstrates strong performance in reading, mathematics and science, and equity outcomes internationally across primary and post-primary levels. Moreover, the socio-economic gap in educational attainment is narrower than on average across OECD countries. The education system outperforms many other countries and exhibits above-average socio-economic fairness and equity. However, despite these accomplishments, differences in outcomes persist for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, and Traveller and Roma students. Similar to other countries, gender gaps are also visible, particularly at the post-primary level. Despite improvements over the last decade, gaps between DEIS and non-DEIS schools persist.

Priority areas and recommendations

The OECD review team identified five priority areas. The key strengths and challenges are summarised below and elaborated in subsequent chapters, which also contain detailed policy recommendations.

Governance of policies to address educational disadvantage

The DoE is committed to addressing educational disadvantage through the DEIS programme and other support mechanisms. The system recognises the importance of stakeholder engagement in education, and the Inspectorate assists in policy making including in the area of educational disadvantage. However, there is limited coordination and integration of services across departments to support students at risk of educational disadvantage. Furthermore, while sharing of good practices exists, it could be further promoted.

The OECD review team recommends to:

- Strengthen the coordination and integration of services across departments to better support students at risk of educational disadvantage.
- Promote further the sharing of good practices in the education system and across schools in the area of educational disadvantage.

Resourcing schools to address educational disadvantage

The baseline resourcing of Irish schools is a relatively stable level playing field. Earmarking and conditionality of DEIS resourcing also ensures an adequate multidimensional tackling of disadvantage. However, the right to costless basic education needs further review. Furthermore, while the DoE managed to enhance trust and support for the DEIS programme for the identification of needs, further improvements can be made in regard to enhancing the validity of the indicators used for this purpose (in particular, the HP Index), and smoothening the differences in levels of support between categories of DEIS schools.

The OECD review team recommends to:

- Further strengthen access to free education.
- Continue refining and validating the indicator(s) of social disadvantage underpinning the targeting of DEIS resources.
- Examine scenarios to attenuate the adverse effects of key thresholds in the DEIS classification algorithm.
- Extend partial additional support to all students defined as disadvantaged.
- Prepare the periodic updating of the indicators of social disadvantage to develop a more dynamic resource allocation model.

Capacity building for schools to address educational disadvantage

DEIS schools benefit from additional teaching and leadership resources. Initial teacher education provides relevant preparation to support disadvantaged students, the professional learning offer is responsive to local needs and DEIS schools have priority access to training aimed at supporting students with the highest levels of needs. The consolidated professional support service, *Oide*, has the potential to further improve teachers' access to relevant capacity-building activities. Furthermore, evaluations of action planning and communities of practice help strengthen capacity building. However, staff shortages are particularly affecting the most disadvantaged schools and the diversity of staff remains an area for development. Continuing professional learning, while critical to capacity building in schools, is limited by an unevenly developed culture of informal learning and appraisal in schools. Moreover, a high level of students' needs places a strain on DEIS schools' capacity.

The OECD review team recommends to:

- Address staff shortages through targeted efforts to attract and retain diverse professionals for a career in disadvantaged schools.
- Embed teachers' continuing professional learning within a professional improvement cycle and remove barriers to participation.
- Focus capacity-building efforts on priority areas both in and around DEIS schools.

School-level interventions to address educational disadvantage

DEIS supports are holistic, centre on student well-being, and are highly regarded and sought after. Initiatives to target local needs are developed and piloted, and evidence-based programmes are at the core of the DEIS programme. However, some support measures, such as Irish exemption or reduced school day, can limit students' opportunities. Moreover, non-DEIS schools often do not have the means to supply additional school resources for disadvantaged students, and many rely on teachers or parents volunteering their time to ensure the provision of services. Waiting times for assessment and, in particular, service provision in the health sector creates a challenge for schools' capacity to support students. Furthermore, some schools face challenges in engaging effectively with parents and the wider community.

The OECD review team recommends to:

- Strengthen equity in provision of additional resources across schools.
- Strengthen the coordination of educational services with the health and therapy service provision to minimise the burden on schools and families in meeting students' needs.
- Review additional costs of education to families to improve the accessibility of provisions.
- Promote promising models and examples of engagement and collaboration with parents and families.

Monitoring and evaluation to address educational disadvantage

Ireland has strong expertise in monitoring and evaluation of the DEIS programme. Furthermore, the system emphasises the role of school self-evaluation, in which the Inspectorate serves a vital role. However, limited use of granular and combined administrative data, and the absence of a control group prevent causal implications in evaluations of the DEIS programme. The system also has little capacity for data-informed improvement planning in DEIS schools.

The OECD review team recommends to:

- Implement more comprehensive data integration and analysis in education policy making.
- Promote research that could provide more information on the causal effects of the DEIS programme.
- Strengthen the use of data at the school level.

Assessment and recommendations

Educational context

Ireland's economy is resilient, but an ageing population and inaccessible housing present challenges for the education system

Ireland's economy demonstrated resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine. The government's COVID-19 measures contributed to the economy weathering many challenges successfully, enabling a strong recovery boosted by exports from the multinational sector and high vaccination rates. Fiscal performance improved, moving from a deficit of -1.6% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 2021 to a surplus of 1.6% in 2022. Moreover, Ireland's public debt fell well below the OECD average, decreasing from 65.5% in 2021 to 46.7% in 2022.

However, as in many other OECD countries, these developments are accompanied by population ageing. It is predicted that the share of people aged 65 and older will increase from 15.1% in 2022 to 21.5% in 2040 and then to 27.5% in 2061. In contrast, the share of the population in early childhood education and care (ECEC) and most of compulsory education (0-14 year-olds) is predicted to decrease from 19.5% in 2022 to 15.3% in 2040, increase slightly to about 15.6% in 2050 and then drop again to 14.1% by 2061. With student numbers decreasing, there may be a shift in public resources towards pension schemes and healthcare. Related to the demographics are migration trends. The number of immigrants, standing at 141.6 thousand in April 2023, has been the highest since 2007. More than half (53%) were aged between 25 and 44 years. Furthermore, 18 266 Ukrainian students had been enrolled in schools across Ireland at the end of April 2024.

Moreover, housing and homelessness pose complex challenges in Ireland. The increase in housing prices in recent years has escalated affordability concerns, exacerbated by a housing stock that has struggled to keep pace with the rising number of households, particularly for lower-income families. Lack of affordable and social housing also impacts homelessness. Homelessness figures are at record levels, with almost 10 000 adults accessing local authority funded emergency accommodation in 2023. The number of dependants (children) accessing local authority managed emergency accommodation also rose from 3 422 in 2019 to 3 962 in 2023.

Ireland demonstrates strong performance and equity internationally, but some gaps are persistent

Ireland demonstrates strong performance and equity outcomes internationally across primary and post-primary (secondary) educational levels. Primary-level students scored among the highest-performing participating countries in mathematics, science and reading in the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) 2019 and the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) 2021. At the post-primary level, students in Ireland surpassed the OECD average in mathematics, reading and science in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2022. Moreover, the socio-economic gap in educational attainment, while still present, is narrower than on average across OECD countries. Overall, Ireland's educational system not only consistently outperforms many other OECD

countries, but also exhibits relative socio-economic fairness, making it one of the stronger performers globally.

Well-being outcomes were generally better in Ireland than on average across OECD countries. In 2022, 81% of 15-year-old students in Ireland reported making friends easily at school (OECD average 76%) and 71% felt they belonged at school (OECD average 75%). Meanwhile, 14% reported feeling lonely at school, and 14% like an outsider or left out of things at school (OECD average 16% and 17%). However, some 13% of 15-year-old girls and 19% of boys reported being the victim of bullying acts at least a few times a month (OECD average 20% of girls and 21% of boys).

Despite these accomplishments, Ireland faces some challenges. Important differences in student outcomes persist for students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, and Traveller and Roma students. Gender gaps, while observed internationally, are also visible, particularly at the post-primary level.

Beyond compulsory education, the early leaving from education and training (ELET) rate[1] has evolved positively over the past decade. The ELET rate has dropped from 8.7% in 2013 to 3.7% in 2022. The Irish population had also a higher proportion of tertiary educated and a lower proportion of low-educated people in 2022. Ireland had 54.4% of 25-64 year-olds tertiary educated in 2022, above the OECD average of 40.4%, and 12.4% had lower secondary education or below (19.4% on average across the OECD).

The DEIS programme aims to address concentrated educational disadvantage in schools

The Delivering Equality of Opportunity In Schools (DEIS) programme, started in 2005 by the Department of Education (DoE), represents a key policy initiative to address concentrated educational disadvantage across the primary and post-primary (secondary) levels. Recognising the profound consequences of underachievement as a result of educational disadvantage in schools, the DEIS programme seeks to provide targeted support to schools with concentrated populations of students from socio-economically disadvantaged communities.

From 2022, 966 primary and 235 post-primary schools have been included in the DEIS programme, and 153 712 primary and 103 657 post-primary students were in DEIS schools in 2022/23. This means that almost a third of schools (29.9% in primary and 32.3% in post-primary) and around a quarter of students (28.0% in primary and 25.5% in post-primary) are part of the programme. DEIS primary schools are divided into DEIS Urban Band 1, DEIS Urban Band 2 and DEIS Rural. DEIS Urban Band 1 schools address relatively higher levels of disadvantage than DEIS Urban Band 2 schools. Post-primary schools in the DEIS programme are not categorised. A range of supports are available to DEIS schools, some of which differ by the DEIS school type. These include the allocation of teachers per student to implement smaller classes (only in DEIS Urban Band 1 primary schools), the allocation of administrative and deputy principals (not in DEIS Rural primary schools), the DEIS grant allocation, access to the Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) Scheme (not in DEIS Rural), enhanced access to the School Meals Programme, access to the School Completion Programme (not in DEIS Rural), literacy and numeracy supports (not in DEIS Rural and DEIS Post-primary), action planning supports, continuous professional learning supports, priority access to National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS), and an enhanced School Books Grant Scheme for Senior Cycle students in DEIS Post-primary schools[2]. While seeing improvements over the last decade, gaps between schools that are part of the DEIS programme and those that are not persist.

Strengths and challenges

The DoE is committed to addressing educational disadvantage through the DEIS programme

Since the 1990s, policy to address educational disadvantage in Ireland has centred on the targeting of additional resources and supports towards schools serving disadvantaged populations. The DEIS programme was then introduced in 2005 to bring together several earlier standalone schemes which addressed specific aspects of educational disadvantage. The rationale for the DEIS approach is the existence of a "multiplier effect", whereby students attending a school with a concentration of students from disadvantaged backgrounds have poorer academic outcomes, even taking account of individual social background.

Analysis of the DEIS programme has shown that it has helped to reduce the gap in achievement between schools serving the highest levels of educational disadvantage and those serving populations with little or no disadvantage. It has provided more equitable opportunities to children who come to education at a disadvantage.

The commitment to educational disadvantage and DEIS has continued over several decades. For example, the Programme for Government 2020 "*Programme for Government - Our Shared Future*" sets out the main political priorities concerning the Irish education system, including a commitment to supporting students with special educational needs and those at risk of educational disadvantage. It commits to the implementation of the revised DEIS programme.

The system recognises the importance of stakeholder engagement in education, but there is limited coordination and integration of services across departments to support students at risk of educational disadvantage

Consultation with education stakeholders is an important element of the Irish education system, as stated in the Education Act (1998). One of the central objectives of the 1998 Act is to promote and give statutory recognition to partnership as a principle which underpins the operation of the education system. To fulfil this goal, the DoE consults Education Partners regarding policy changes or issues of equity and inclusion in primary and post-primary education. The Education Partners include national bodies representing school administrators and patrons, teachers' unions, principals, parents and students, as well as non-governmental advocacy bodies. The DoE involves the Education Partners regularly to gain from their knowledge and they advise the Department on any proposed changes. Education Partners are also represented in the DEIS Advisory Group that meets at least once a year or more often if more pressing issues for discussion arise.

While the involvement of stakeholders is key in ensuring an effective tackling of educational disadvantage, it is not sufficient by itself. Coordination and collaboration among different departments and services is fundamental as well. In horizontal coordination, sharing or coordinating responsibilities among government departments or government and non-government actors can have positive impacts for equity and inclusion in education. The need to integrate services and coordinate between departments to reflect the multidimensional nature of disadvantage has also been recognised in Ireland and features in the design and objectives of the DEIS Plan. In this area, the DoE has both developed formal and informal engagement with various other Departments, it takes part in several governmental initiatives (such as the DEIS Advisory Group) and is involved in various intra-departmental policies such as the Roadmap for Inclusion and the Anti-Racism Plan. Moreover, education policy and the DEIS programme have also featured in the Cabinet Committee on Children and Education (and the previous Committee on Education).

Overall, while service integration is an important and recurring theme across many government strategies, evidence suggests that weak service integration continues to undermine day-to-day experiences for

children and families. For instance, despite recent efforts, the OECD review team was informed that the schools (particularly principals and staff) were in many cases required to support parents with the coordination of social and health services and that there is limited coordination of these services with the education sector at the system level. In addition, according to a recent OECD report, children and young people with complex mental and physical health needs continue to face challenges to access appropriate counselling and quality support due to fragmentation in the delivery of services and lack of coordination between relevant departments and agencies.

The DoE Inspectorate assists in policy making, but the sharing of good practices on educational disadvantage could be further promoted in the education system and among schools

In Ireland, there is a long history of evaluating schools and teachers by the centralised Inspectorate, which is a division of the DoE, but acts independently. This structure can enable building synergies by closely interlinking the work of the Inspectorate with the other units of the DoE. Inspections are carried out 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 education system. The Inspectorate does this by providing evaluation, analysis, support and advice in relation to education provision mainly at early years, primary and post-primary levels. Inspectors also provide advice on a range of education issues to school communities, policy makers in the Department and to the wider education system. Additionally, the Inspectorate provides valuable advice to policy makers within the DoE and the broader education system.

Moreover, the Inspectorate has the role of collecting and describing promising practices and programmes in its published reports of inspected schools, as well as more thematic reports, including on main inspection findings from DEIS schools. Research evidence shows the potential of promoting collaboration with other schools as it benefits peer learning, the sharing of resources and school improvement efforts more generally. In addition, the Inspectorate shares good practices about DEIS through numerous presentations given to Trustee bodies at the school level, Education Training Boards, DEIS seminars and working with Education Centres. The DoE and *Oide* (new support service for teachers and school leaders, funded by the DoE) also contribute to the sharing of good practices throughout the system: the DoE, for instance, has organised some learning days to share good practices, while *Oide* has been facilitating seminars and workshops to support DEIS schools to create SMART targets in DEIS action planning.

Despite some existing initiatives, there is scope for strengthening school-to-school collaborations and networking in the Irish education system. The OECD review team heard during interviews and school visits that sharing of good practices to support students at risk of educational disadvantage often takes place through informal exchanges between schools. The OECD team also gained the impression that not all schools were aware of all the guidance materials and tools for DEIS support available on various sites and links, and thus often relied on exchanging about practices with other schools.

The baseline resourcing of Irish schools is relatively stable, but voluntary contributions can present a challenge to some parents

International evidence shows that countries often exhibit a structural inequality in the baseline resourcing of schools that may partially offset targeted funding supports. Disadvantaged schools tend to operate in older buildings, lack modern equipment, and have greater difficulties in attracting and retaining well-qualified teachers and principals. Ireland does not appear to be prominently facing this issue, at least at the primary level. Research has shown similar levels of human resources between DEIS and non-DEIS schools, as well as participation in continuing professional learning. Based on the representative National Assessments of Mathematics and English Reading (NAMER) 2021 survey, some gap appears only in terms of material resources – such as access to ICT or (stocks of) information books – in favour of non-

DEIS schools at primary level. Otherwise, abstracting from the DEIS support, primary schools do not seem to be systematically less well-resourced through government funding, but PISA 2022 showed that DEIS Post-primary schools do suffer disproportionately from a lack of human resources.

Students can face certain expenses within the education system. In particular, voluntary (financial) contributions (as well as other school-related costs charged to parents) are a topic that has not been extensively researched yet and remains a subject of controversy. While limited, data show that DEIS schools tend to be far more cautious in asking parents for a school contribution. Whereas 66% of non-DEIS urban principals replied that they asked for voluntary contributions, only 21% of DEIS Urban Band 1 and 30% of DEIS Urban Band 2 schools did so. This suggests that the DEIS support's financial implications help schools reduce the financial pressure on parents. However, this phenomenon may reinforce socio-economic segregation among schools by attracting more students from disadvantaged backgrounds into DEIS schools. According to the Admissions Act 2018 and Circular 32/2017, voluntary contributions may only be sought from parents, where it is made clear to parents that there is no compulsion to pay and that a child's place in the school or continued enrolment is not dependent on a willingness to make a contribution.

The use of the HP Index for the identification of needs enhances trust and support for DEIS, but its validity could be improved

The DEIS identification mechanism has undergone significant improvements in regard to the use of more overarching and objective parameters. The OECD review team was informed that there was a lot of discontent about the allocation of DEIS resources in the past. Whereas some stakeholders admitted that they were not aware of the criteria for inclusion of schools in the DEIS programme, others thought that criteria were arbitrary or a product of case-by-case bargaining. The adoption of the Pobal Haase Pratschke Index (HP Index) as a scientifically underpinned – though still imperfect – instrument was a significant step forward in identifying and prioritising the needs of schools for additional resources. The main advantages of the HP Index are that it is census-based, already used by several Irish departments and services, does not require separate data collections for its update, and it has been validated scientifically through a comparison with alternative potential indicators. Moreover, the algorithm used within DEIS focuses on social disadvantage at school level rather than individual level, which reflects the larger effect of concentration of disadvantage on student outcomes, compared to individuals' lower socio-economic status.

However, there is room for further improvement of the algorithm. On the one hand, the content of the HP Index could be balanced further in the future, in particular in regard to the inclusion of variables relating to immigrant or ethnic minority background that are currently not accounted for in the HP Index. This exclusion is partly remedied by the separate weighting of Traveller and Roma students, recently arrived refugees and students experiencing homelessness. Yet, Ireland remains an outlier, as most European Union and OECD countries consider immigrant status as a criterion for extra support to schools. While Ireland is in the exceptional position of attracting high-qualified immigrants due to its high-tech sector, the argument does not apply to all immigrants and more fine-grained indicators may be needed. Furthermore, the rising concern about mental health issues among young people may justify a search for indicators of youth mental health as an additional input into the identification model (although such data do not seem to be currently available).

Moreover, the design of the algorithm transforming the HP Index into a classification tool is complex, with several stages of transformation, cutting-off and addition of data. While the focus on concentrations of disadvantage is beyond dispute, it remains unclear to what extent the resulting classification into four categories at primary level (DEIS Urban Band 1, DEIS Urban Band 2, DEIS Rural and non-DEIS) and two at post-primary level (DEIS and non-DEIS) is valid, what proportion of the theoretical target groups actually receives support, and to what extent the most disadvantaged students are receiving the strongest support.

Thus, the internal validity of the resulting classification deserves a closer inspection. The key question is not just to what extent the inequalities in outcomes between DEIS and non-DEIS schools are decreasing across time, but more importantly, to what extent overall inequalities in outcomes between socio-economically advantaged and disadvantaged students (irrespective of the type of schools they are attending) are diminishing.

The earmarking and conditionality of DEIS resourcing ensures an adequate multidimensional tackling of disadvantage, but thresholds in the DEIS classification mechanism result in large differences in levels of support

A strength of the DEIS programme is that the core additional resources that it grants to schools are earmarked and provided in-kind. As a result of this multi-pronged approach, there is a guarantee that schools tackle educational disadvantage using the whole range of instruments, rather than just reducing class size or engaging additional teaching staff. Moreover, schools are obliged to design their own DEIS action plans with school-specific targets, and to evaluate their own progress.

However, the use of hard thresholds and the categorisation in four categories can pose a challenge to the schools and their ability to tackle disadvantage in their student population. This concerns both schools that qualify and those that do not qualify for DEIS support. Firstly, thresholds draw a dividing line between schools that benefit from additional resources and schools that do not, with a risk of fuelling stigma among the former and/or envy among the latter, and potentially reinforce segregation among schools. Additionally, from a resourcing standpoint, not qualifying for the support can make a significant difference for schools, driving vertical and horizontal equity issues between schools. There is an on-going debate about tapering of the DEIS support, i.e. using sliding scales of support instead of "in or out" thresholds. Schools that fall just outside the threshold for inclusion in the DEIS programme may also need additional support to foster social inclusion, despite the existence of mainstream instruments for that purpose. The estimated relatively high proportion of socio-economically disadvantaged students who do not attend DEIS schools also suggests a need for tapering of supports. On the other end of the distribution, the most disadvantaged schools flag the need for a "DEIS plus" category, stating that their needs are overwhelming, and the current level of support appears to be insufficient. Principals report severe cases of intergenerational poverty, family breakups, trauma linked to state care placement, homelessness, mental health issues, violence, (parental) substance abuse and bullying, all symptoms of pockets of extreme marginalisation that may need further recognition and support.

DEIS schools can benefit from additional teaching and leadership resources, but the high level of student needs often places a strain on DEIS schools' capacity in several priority areas

Teachers in many DEIS schools are faced with challenges in meeting the diverse needs of students with high levels of educational disadvantage. While the overall benefits of class size reductions are contested, there is evidence suggesting that disadvantaged students, particularly at lower levels of education, benefit the most from smaller classes. In Ireland, the most disadvantaged primary schools in urban areas (DEIS Urban Band 1 schools) benefit from reduced class sizes. While DEIS primary schools (DEIS Urban Band 2 and DEIS Rural) and DEIS Post-primary schools do not benefit from class size reductions, NAMER 2021 and PISA 2022 data suggest that class sizes in DEIS Urban Band 2 primary schools were lower than in non-DEIS schools (for second class students) and disadvantaged post-primary schools in Ireland tend to have slightly lower student-teacher ratios.

Principals in Ireland are generally confident in their teachers' ability to meet students' needs. However, 19.9% of 15-year-olds attended a school whose principal reported in PISA 2022 that teachers – to some extent – could not meet their students' needs (compared to 27.8% "to some extent" or "a lot" across the OECD). While teachers are not expected to address all of their students' needs or to address them on their

own, and are supported by a range of professionals, particularly in DEIS schools (e.g. career guidance counsellors, special education teachers, special needs assistants, HSCL Coordinators, SCP staff and Student Support Teams at the post-primary level), high levels of students' needs are placing a strain on the entire support system. This issue appears to particularly affect DEIS schools. The OECD review team formed the impression that at least some of the capacity challenges experienced by DEIS schools relate to a rise in the level and complexity of students' needs, as well as the support schools are expected to provide. Often, schools are seen as a hub for different actors to interact and to provide children with wraparound support services in a safe environment, or at least to direct them to appropriate sources of external support. While many actors have embraced this vision of schools in the spirit of a holistic approach to learning, it appears that schools – particularly those with the highest levels of disadvantage – cannot rise to this challenge alone and without sufficient capacity around them. Stakeholders pointed to the lack of therapeutic support and other staff trained to work directly with students and parents on trauma and other severe issues as impeding children's education (including psychologists, speech and language therapists, counsellors, occupational therapists etc.).

The professional learning offer is responsive to the local needs of teachers and of DEIS schools, but staff shortages remain a challenge for both DEIS and non-DEIS schools

High-quality initial teacher education (ITE) programmes aim to equip teachers with both the knowledge and skills they need to make appropriate professional judgements and deliver effective instruction. Although ITE programmes mark the beginning and not the end of teachers' professional learning journey, they can lay a strong foundation on which teachers can continue building throughout their careers. At the same time, teachers are faced with evolving responsibilities and an increasing expectation to act as leaders, e.g. by assuming responsibilities beyond the classroom, including for school improvement or the professional learning of their peers. Teachers are also increasingly expected to take a holistic approach to students' education that considers both their learning and well-being. The perceived rise in expectations has been a reported source of stress among teachers, which underlines the importance of a well-designed ITE system. Ireland's DoE has undertaken clear efforts to ensure that ITE programmes reflect these developments and continue preparing teachers to meet evolving expectations and to address diverse students' needs. While teachers interviewed during the OECD review visit emphasised the limitations of ITE and underlined the steep learning curves they experienced during their first years in service, the OECD team formed the impression that teachers – on the whole – felt their ITE programmes provided them with a strong position to start their careers.

While teacher training has been successful in preparing teachers for their careers, Ireland has been grappling with a significant teacher shortage over the past few years. Principals in PISA 2022 reported that instruction for about a third of students was hindered to some extent by inadequate or poorly qualified teaching staff, which risks compounding the capacity issues caused by teacher shortages. Teacher shortages in Ireland particularly affect students in disadvantaged schools and areas. The shortage of teaching staff remained significantly more pronounced in disadvantaged schools, a difference that was among the largest observed in OECD countries. This is consistent with reports heard by the OECD review team that DEIS schools faced particular challenges attracting and retaining staff and sometimes failed to fill positions by the beginning of the school year in part for being perceived as difficult teaching environments. Staff shortages within Ireland's schools are compounded by those of relevant external support services (e.g. NEPS and Tusla staff) on which schools rely to support their most disadvantaged students in particular.

ITE provides teachers with relevant preparation to support disadvantaged students, but there are still factors that limit teachers' engagement in continuous professional learning

As with other countries, Ireland is placing an increasing emphasis on inclusive education and the provision of differentiated support to meet the needs of a diverse student population, including in ITE. Indeed, Ireland's updated ITE standards refer to inclusive education as one of the seven core elements of ITE programmes. To deliver successful ITE programmes, it is also important to provide teachers with opportunities to practise their knowledge and skills in a classroom setting. To this end, the Teaching Council considers school placements as "the fulcrum of teacher education" and requires the school-based element of ITE programmes to include at least 200 hours of direct teaching experience in a variety of school contexts. However, strengthening teachers' capacity for high-quality instruction requires a strong emphasis on continuing professional learning from the time they enter the classroom to the end of their careers. In Ireland, teachers' individual professional learning largely depends on a high level of intrinsic motivation and their schools' capacity to support this practice. This lack of general requirements for primary and post-primary teachers to participate in continuing professional learning stands out in international comparison. Moreover, there are barriers that may deter Irish teachers from engaging in voluntary continuing professional learning. For instance, during the OECD review visit, multiple schools reported having difficulties organising substitutes to allow teachers to engage in continuing professional learning during the school year.

Ireland is also among a minority of OECD countries that do not engage in the systematic regular appraisal of teachers or principals. According to OECD data, in 2015, at the primary level, 28 of 35 OECD countries had a legislative framework for teacher appraisal at the primary and secondary level and Ireland was one of only four among them that did not require regular appraisals. This lack of appraisals risks limiting a system's ability to evaluate teachers' abilities, guide their professional progress and may undermine teachers' long-term motivation. Furthermore, the OECD review team formed the impression that not all schools are systematically engaging in collaborative learning, particularly in the form of regular classroom-observations and feedback (either by principals or by peers). From PISA data, it also appears as though teachers in Ireland's most disadvantaged schools are the least likely to receive feedback on their practice from their school leadership and there is also evidence of significant inequities across schools.

Capacity building is further promoted through the Inspectorate's approach to the DEIS action planning and with the support of communities of practice

Schools in the DEIS programme are subject to the Inspectorate's full range of inspection models, ranging from incidental, unannounced one-day inspections to more intensive whole-school evaluations and "follow-through inspections" focused on the implementation of recommendations made in previous inspection reports. In addition, inspections of DEIS schools place a strong emphasis on the schools' action planning process, which guides the schools' improvement and capacity building. The external evaluation of DEIS schools focuses on how schools devise, implement and monitor their DEIS action plan and its impact on teaching practices, students' learning experiences and outcomes with respect to ten DEIS themes. The action planning process can enhance schools' capacity both indirectly – by strengthening the school management's approach to collaborative improvement planning – and directly – by providing schools with evaluative feedback on their use of continuing professional learning. While there appears to remain scope for improvement in the effective use of continuing professional learning in DEIS schools, particularly at the post-primary level, the inspection reports underlined that investments in continuing professional learning clearly paid off and complimented the high teaching quality in primary schools with a strong professional learning culture. In addition to the Inspectorate's approach to the DEIS action planning process to promote capacity building, communities of practice can provide teachers with a safe environment to expose themselves to new practices, to challenge their tacit assumptions, and to engage

in active discussions with their peers on what works and why. Ireland recognises the potential of informal learning and teachers are increasingly complementing their traditional training with an active engagement in communities of practice. *Oide* has reported that they are actively promoting the formation of communities of practice and are building them into their professional learning frameworks. Moreover, the DoE, in collaboration with the Inspectorate and the Education Centres, has established communities of practice for DEIS principals.

The diversity of school staff remains limited and key groups are underrepresented

The diversity of school staff and student-teacher congruence with respect to key demographic characteristics (e.g. belonging to the same ethnic or socio-economic group) can help improve the well-being and education outcomes of minority and disadvantaged students. The diversity of the teaching workforce has been a policy focus in Ireland for over a decade, particularly since national datasets have brought to light the relatively homogenous socio-demographic profile of applicants and entrants into ITE programmes. Over the past decades, data have suggested that students from non-Irish backgrounds and those who attended DEIS schools were under-represented among entrants into primary and post-primary ITE programmes. Ireland developed strategies and plans over time to improve the diversity of its school staff, not only in terms of socio-economic status but also ethnic background and disabilities. Nevertheless, teachers in Ireland still do not reflect the diversity of their students. This likely has a variety of causes, including the low number of diverse teachers entering ITE and those completing the programmes. The conditions for entering the teaching profession, such as the Irish language requirement in primary education, may add barriers that risk putting off candidates from disadvantaged backgrounds. Higher attrition rates among diverse in-service teachers can be another factor reducing the representativeness of teaching staff. International evidence, primarily from the United States, for example, shows that teachers from minority backgrounds (and novice teachers) are disproportionately employed in disadvantaged, more challenging school settings, which can lead to higher attrition rates.

The supports provided by DEIS are highly regarded and sought after by schools, but non-DEIS schools often have to rely on teacher or parent volunteers to ensure the provision of certain services

The supports that the DEIS programme provides to schools are quite comprehensive and aim at ensuring schools have a range of means to support their students' learning, along with their well-being. These supports are highly regarded and sought after, not only by teachers and principals, but also by families. In particular, the HSCL Scheme and the School Completion Programme are widely appreciated within the Irish education system. However, non-DEIS schools sometimes struggle to match the offer of DEIS in terms of other supports and activities, such as the provision of extra-curricular activities and breakfast clubs. They may not have sufficient funding to provide these activities, in particular when they have limited opportunities to raise funds through their communities. The OECD review team heard about some schools heavily relying on fundraising and philanthropy from the more advantaged families in their schools, and on parents and teachers – the latter at times being expected to - volunteering their time to run these activities. The time that teachers dedicate to such activities is not remunerated but added on top of their formal working hours. Some principals flagged concerns for the additional strain that this poses on teachers and highlighted the risk of them incurring in burnouts or fatigue, due to the increasing workload.

Moreover, schools – both non-DEIS and DEIS – sometimes rely on contributions from families to fund their activities. Reliance on voluntary contributions has been highlighted as a challenge for both schools and the families they serve. In particular, voluntary contributions are an additional expense for families that already face important costs through their children's education, such as for textbooks for Senior Cycle students, uniforms, and other fees such as Transition Year (TY) fees – which complement grants (such as the TY grant) from the DoE. A funding challenge also exists in regard to the hiring of specialised staff.

While the flexibility of the DEIS Grant allows schools to respond to very specific needs in its context, this practice has some limitations. For instance, the investment that some schools make towards the hiring of psychologists, therapists or other staff takes away from investments in other potential areas of need for the school.

The system's DEIS supports take a holistic approach that centre on student well-being, but there are unmet needs for assessment and therapy services

The DoE's approach to supporting well-being and mental health is set out in the Wellbeing Policy and Framework for Practice (2019-2025), which proposes a preventative, multi-component, whole-school approach to supporting well-being that includes both universal and targeted actions. In line with this general approach, DEIS offers students support that is holistic in nature, and as such focuses not only on students' academic outcomes but also on their physical and psychological well-being. An example is the School Meals Programme, which fosters student well-being from several viewpoints and is well complemented by several initiatives that support students' psychological and socio-emotional development.

While the system proposes a holistic model to respond to children's needs and foster their well-being, long waiting times for accessing health and therapy services negatively impact on the ability of the education system to reach its holistic aim. This has a particularly negative impact for those students whose needs intersect educational disadvantage and special educational needs. Various schools reported having to support families to access health and therapy services. The National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) of the DoE provides educational psychological support to primary, post-primary and special schools. It supports schools with casework service, while also providing a support and development service to build capacity in schools. The OECD review team was informed by schools that the allocation of time from the NEPS psychologist is insufficient to fully provide for a comprehensive educational psychological service.

Moreover, there are challenges for both the healthcare and the education system in recruiting qualified psychologists and other therapy professionals as the country faces a shortage of personnel in this area. Cross-departmental workforce planning, underpinned by cross-departmental policy, is required to meet the need for services in this area.

Some schools – DEIS and non-DEIS – have initiatives in place to engage parents and the wider community, but not all schools have the resources and capacity to do so

Research has shown that the involvement of parents, guardians and communities in the learning of their children plays a pivotal role in students' educational achievement and broader well-being. Engaging local communities, parents or guardians, and families is therefore important for schools who seek to create inclusive and equitable school environments. In Ireland, there is a recognition on the importance of family and community engagement with schools. Moreover, DEIS schools have school planning requirements to promote partnership with parents. Indeed, data from PISA 2018 found that students in DEIS schools had a significantly higher mean score on the index of school policies for parental involvement.

Despite some notable initiatives, such as the Partnership Schools Ireland, there are still challenges for schools to engage parents and families successfully in both DEIS and non-DEIS schools. The OECD review team gained the impression that various schools struggled with engaging all parents, and in particular parents of the most disadvantaged students. The OECD review team was informed that one reason that limits non-DEIS schools' ability to engage parents and communities more systematically is their lack of access to the HSCL Scheme. The OECD review team heard that several schools struggled to find the time and resources to engage more extensively at-risk families. Moreover, schools reported having limitations linked to their material resources when planning their family and community engagement strategies related, for instance, to school spaces. Principals and teachers mentioned the lack of a separate

room where they could meet privately with parents, or in which they could organise some activities or workshops.

Evidence is central to the Irish education system, from DEIS literacy and numeracy strategies to the development, piloting and evaluation of local initiatives for specific needs

The Irish education system incorporates evidence systematically. This concerns the implementation of DEIS and its literacy and numeracy programmes components, but also the DoE practice of developing pilots to test responses to local needs and challenges. DEIS is the first programme of its kind to provide literacy and numeracy programmes (i.e. Reading Recovery; First Steps; Maths Recovery; and Ready, Set, Go Maths) to involved students, and data collected suggest that the uptake of literacy and numeracy programmes has been universal and successful among DEIS schools. Evidence suggests that these programmes have helped in particular the lowest performing students, both in the short- and long-term. Yet, research indicates that the evidence on the Reading Recovery programme is not as robust, not specific enough to the Irish context and would benefit from further assessment.

On top of the evaluations of the literacy and numeracy programmes, the Irish education system has a long-standing practice of developing pilots and projects to respond to local needs. These pilots allow the DoE to address local needs and verify the effectiveness of different interventions, evaluating the potential for mainstreaming certain programmes and initiatives. These pilot projects span over different areas, and often aim at supporting disadvantage throughout the education system. This includes, for instance, the City Connects pilot project and the Multi-disciplinary Team project in the Dublin area. Other initiatives and pilot programmes concern specific student groups, such as the Supporting Traveller and Roma pilot project, which targets attendance, participation and retention, and school completion in specific Traveller and Roma communities. Along with the work in the North East Inner City project, an additional example of an initiative to respond to local needs, is the Limerick Regeneration Framework Implementation Plan, which was developed as the Irish government recognised the need to address the root causes and symptoms of social and economic exclusion in Limerick's regeneration areas. This project has a core education component and has been showing positive results along the years, including notable decrease in early school leaving and an enhancement in retention rates up to the Junior Cycle examinations and Leaving Certificate.

Some support measures can limit the future opportunities of students

Some of the support measures that are meant to assist diverse students with their specific learning needs may hinder their future educational and professional opportunities. This pertains, for instance, to the exemption from Irish language classes for students meeting the relevant criteria, and the possibility of adopting reduced school days (RSD) – the latter in particular for Traveller and Roma students. The main limitation linked to the exemption from the study of the Irish language relates to the access to certain paths in higher education and some professions. For example, certain third-level courses and occupations (e.g. primary education teachers) require students to have (a minimum grade) in Irish, which may be challenging to acquire, if exempted at school.

In regard to RSD, this is a support measure meant only to be put in place in exceptional circumstances and that requires schools to notify Tusla Educational Support Service (TESS) when assigned to a student. Its aim is to help students in particular circumstances, e.g. return after a period of absence, or due to a medical or mental health-related condition. TESS, on receipt of the notification from schools, supports both the parent and the school on how to use the RSD and to ensure that a plan is in place to cease the RSD over a defined period of time, no longer than six weeks. However, some Traveller and Roma groups are concerned that families are not well informed on this practice and not sufficiently aware of their rights. Moreover, some stakeholders – who engage with the DoE on these issues - worry about the inappropriate

application of reduced school days, indicating they are being used outside of their original purpose, mainly as a behavioural management tool, thus inappropriately excluding students from part of the learning process. The DoE has particularly recognised the need to support Traveller families in this area, and collaborated with Traveller organisations to disseminate info to parents and families, including through the development of a video for parents of Traveller children to inform them of their rights in respect to RSDs.

While Ireland has a strong expertise in monitoring and evaluation in regard to DEIS, the use of granular and combined administrative data is limited, and evaluations lack control groups and causal implications

The DoE is committed to monitoring and evaluation, highlighted by collaboration and close integration with the Educational Research Centre. Furthermore, the DoE's commitment to innovative educational initiatives is evidenced by a range of pilot programmes. Indeed, monitoring and evaluation permeate the system with various institutions and organisations outside the public sector commissioning research. However, while wealth of information is available to the DoE to shape the system's strong expertise in monitoring and evaluation, certain gaps persist. The DoE has not yet fully reaped the potential of the data estimating socio-economic background at the student level. Even though non-administrative data sources have been used extensively to partially fill this gap, without access to population-wide student-level data on socio-economic background, research is often hindered by small sample sizes and non-response rates. The OECD review team learned there are capacity, technical and legislative barriers to sharing, using and disaggregating administrative data. For instance, one challenge is the lack of standardised data formats and interoperability standards across different institutions. Data security and privacy concerns further complicate the sharing process, as institutions must navigate complex legal and ethical frameworks to ensure compliance.

The DEIS programme has been subject to several major reviews and evaluations, using a wide range of quantitative and qualitative sources. These, broadly speaking, show that gaps between DEIS and non-DEIS schools are, in many instances, closing. However, these evaluations suffer from the absence of a control group and causal implications. The use of a control group, however, may have ethical implications. Furthermore, estimating the causal impacts of the DEIS programme is inherently challenging due to the presence of numerous pre-existing educational initiatives. Moreover, DEIS is not the only initiative implemented in the education system, and it might be challenging to disentangle the effect of DEIS (or a specific DEIS support) from other policies, strategies and supports (within or outside of DEIS). Other challenges relate to the potential indirect effects of the DEIS programme due to staff (and students) moving between DEIS and non-DEIS schools with varying levels of expertise, continuing professional learning and experience. Difficulties in establishing causal effects impede the accurate measurement of the DEIS programme's impact on student outcomes. Without causal estimates, policy makers face challenges in determining whether observed changes in student achievement can be attributed to the DEIS programme or other factors and, as such, determining the value for money for the public investment.

The system emphasises the role of self-evaluation for school improvement in which the Inspectorate plays a vital role, but there is little capacity for data-informed improvement planning in DEIS schools

School self-evaluation (SSE) is a crucial aspect of educational practice among OECD countries, reflecting a commitment to continuous improvement. Since its formal integration into the Irish school system in 2012, the SSE process has become a cornerstone in enhancing the quality of education for students. SSE is viewed as a necessary and inherently positive process in the DEIS programme. Indeed, integral to the DEIS action planning process is the involvement of students, parents, local communities and agencies operating at the local level. One of those agencies is the Inspectorate. The Inspectorate's evaluation process involves a comprehensive examination of DEIS schools, encompassing leadership, teaching

quality and overall school improvement. It has developed a dedicated model, the Evaluation of Action Planning for Improvement in DEIS Schools, focusing on the effectiveness of school-based action planning processes in DEIS Urban Band 1 primary and DEIS Post-primary schools. The Inspectorate also provides insights into various aspects, including school life, leadership of DEIS action planning, and the quality of teaching, learning and professional development.

However, while DEIS schools are expected to gather evidence and analyse data as part of the self-evaluation that underpins the DEIS action planning process, some post-primary schools' capacity to collect, interpret and use data to develop evidence-informed improvement strategies remains limited. Several developments have taken place in this area, e.g. *Oide* offers school leadership teams a programme on data and research-informed school planning, and the Inspectorate offers advisory visits to support the robust use of school-level data. Nevertheless, the OECD review team formed the impression that most principals had not yet received sufficient training or guidance and were not aware or availing themselves of the support on offer. A frequently reported barrier to the digital transformation of schools is the lack of technical support. The need to build digital capacity extends beyond the classroom and teachers' use of digital education technologies. To this end, to ensure the effective use of data for school improvement, capacity building will need to extend to the school leadership and beyond.

Recommendations

Strengthen the coordination and integration of services across departments to better support students at risk of educational disadvantage

Effective coordination across government departments, agencies, service providers, and the community and voluntary sector is crucial, given that children and young people have specific needs spanning all policy and service areas. In the area of educational disadvantage, it is especially important to promote coordination and collaboration across the whole of government. A whole-of-government approach aims to improve the horizontal and vertical coordination of government activity to improve policy coherence and the use of resources. In Ireland, the government engages in some coordination and collaboration to meet the needs of students and communities at risk of educational disadvantage, including through the DEIS Advisory Group and the new Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office. However, it would be important to further strengthen coordination across departments and units so that policy for education in early years education aligns with that for primary and post-primary and in turn aligns with policy for higher and further education. While there are several promising developments in this area, there is still limited integration of services at the national and local levels. It is also crucial to strengthen the integration of services across departments so that students at risk of educational disadvantage are supported in their learning, social and emotional needs. This requires the DoE and its related agencies to work closely with other relevant departments and service providers and establish cross-sectoral co-operation in regard to health and welfare issues in education.

Promote further the sharing of good practices in the education system and across schools in the area of educational disadvantage

In Ireland, there are many good practices in its education system and within schools on how to support students at risk of educational disadvantage. At the national level, for instance, the DoE organises shared learning days. In addition, DEIS communities of practice in education centres take place. The OECD review team heard that many practices are also shared on the initiative of principals and teachers. The Inspectorate collaborates with other DoE support services to share evidence-based practices with teachers and schools. This takes place, for example, through the Inspectorate's publications on DEIS, a newsletter for schools on school self-evaluation which has featured DEIS practices, and advisory visits. However,

Ireland could further promote available tools and share good practices in the system and among schools on supporting students at risk of educational disadvantage, in both DEIS and non-DEIS schools. There are several resources in reports, websites, presentations and webinars that contain tools and good practices, and schools might not always be aware and know where to search for these. More specifically, establishing an online repository of good practices in the education system might be useful where schools and other stakeholders can search for relevant practice examples in the area of educational disadvantage. Users could search among different themes and categories.

Further strengthen access to free education

Ireland has adhered to several international conventions and joint commitments that aim to guarantee the right to free education, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the European Pillar of Social Rights and the EU Child Guarantee agenda. The Irish law also prohibits requests for voluntary contributions, or any kind of other contribution, when parents apply for enrolment or re-enrolment in a school. The (universal) school capitation grant for operating costs of primary and post-primary schools have also been recently increased. However, under a regime of free school choice, a sound balance between universal and targeted pillars in education resourcing is essential to prevent social segregation among schools. The DoE is seeking to create guidelines which will require all schools to develop a Charter in consultation with parents and students, aiming to enhance school-community engagement by encouraging community input on various matters, including on voluntary contributions. Nevertheless, a further strengthening of the access to free education might be necessary. This could be achieved by a review – by level of education – of categories of costs that should not be charged to parents in accordance with international conventions. It might also be important to monitor the actual school-related expenses by parents through surveys and, if needed, adjusting the capitation grant. Finally, the OECD review team recommends advising schools on how to minimise charges and how to manage voluntary contributions correctly; and, if needed, sanction unlawful pressure exercised by schools.

Continue refining and validating the indicator(s) of social disadvantage underpinning the targeting of DEIS resources

The analysis of the HP Index revealed both strengths and shortcomings of this indicator. Strengths include the multidimensionality and relatively cheap derivation of the Index, its privacy proofness and the absence of administrative burden on schools, as well as its use in several policy areas. However, the HP Index remains purely socio-economic and captures only indirectly and partly the disadvantages linked to psychological and socio-emotional well-being, and cultural barriers and immigrant background. Yet, there is evidence in the international literature about the obstacles linked to mental health issues and students with an immigrant background. Thus, the target effectiveness and efficiency of the DEIS programme could be improved by the inclusion of additional dimensions of social disadvantage. Further research would also be helpful to assess (and possibly improve) the scientific validity of the HP Index as a key indicator. Such validation studies should be repeated at primary as well as post-primary levels, with a range of relevant dependent variables (e.g. cognitive and non-cognitive outcomes, early leaving from education and training, transition to tertiary education) to sketch a comprehensive picture of the predictive power of the (present or amended) HP Index and alternative indicators.

Examine scenarios to attenuate the adverse effects of key thresholds in the DEIS classification algorithm

The present algorithm that results in the classification of schools to be part of the DEIS programme uses mainly two key characteristics of the student body at school level, derived from the HP Index: a weighted severity of disadvantage and its extent (the proportion of students considered as disadvantaged). Cut-off

thresholds are used at the individual level to measure degrees of disadvantage, and subsequently at school level and area-level to classify schools. The combination of thresholds at individual, school and area level makes the algorithm complex and less predictable, which results in frustration among some schools that are not part of the programme. Above all, the "all-or-nothing" threshold makes it more difficult to alter the level of support to meet the current need when the levels of disadvantage have changed. It is, therefore, worth examining if smoother algorithms could be designed. At the individual level, a continuous value of the degree of disadvantage or an interval variable using more than four values (0, 0.5, 1 and 2) measuring the severity of disadvantage could be used. At the school level, a continuous value (ranging from zero to one, for example) reflecting the degree of concentration of disadvantage, based on the proportion of students exceeding a given threshold of disadvantage in the school (or an interval variable using more than three thresholds at smaller intervals), could be explored. The resulting algorithm would be smoother and more logical, and it would avoid the stacking of cut-off lines in successive steps at individual and school levels.

Extend partial additional support to all students defined as disadvantaged

Like in other OECD countries, all Irish schools have access to a limited array of specific resources and instruments to cater for socially disadvantaged students. Priority resourcing of schools in the DEIS programme dealing with a concentration of disadvantage is justified, as concentration *per se* has a negative effect on students' learning opportunities. Nevertheless, there are several arguments to invest more in all disadvantaged students, irrespective of their school's degree of concentration. Individual socio-economic and cultural minority background also affects the opportunities of students, irrespective of concentration effects. From an ethical point of view, all disadvantaged students have a right to additional supports if the policy objective is to achieve equal opportunities. The most recent published data from 2021 indicated that the focus on concentration schools (i.e. the DEIS programme) appeared to cover less than half of the disadvantaged student population, although this has likely now increased following the extension of DEIS in 2022. Thus, covering all disadvantaged students reduces the harmful effects of potential misclassification of schools. Moreover, the current range of measures and resources besides DEIS could be integrated into a more coherent overall framework to address social disadvantage. Indeed, a full coverage of the target group(s), irrespective of their geographical environment, also means that all schools would be accountable for the achievement of equal opportunities.

Prepare the periodic updating of the indicators of social disadvantage to develop a more dynamic resource allocation model

During the review process, the OECD learned that while the DEIS programme has been extended to additional schools, there are schools that had been included in the DEIS programme earlier whose disadvantage levels are no longer at the same level, and yet have continued receiving full support. A phased plan to revise the resource allocation spread over several years would be recommended to allow schools to adjust their internal resource allocation. A phased change in resources should not be seen as a penalty on good performance because the assignment of a DEIS status and the allocation of resources occur exclusively on the basis of exogenous measures of need. Nor should phasing out for some schools result in layoffs if services are gradually reallocated to other schools. This, however, would not be feasible in advance of the development of a smoother algorithm, advocated in the previous recommendation. Combined with transition periods spread over several years, this could make the reallocation of resources more acceptable and prepare the ground for future adjustments.

Address staff shortages through targeted efforts to attract and retain diverse professionals for a career in schools

Ireland is facing a significant shortage of teachers and other key staff, which is compromising schools' capacity to provide all learners with the support they need. In fact, teacher shortages have intensified over recent years and reached one of the highest levels across OECD countries in 2022. PISA data suggest that these shortages are particularly pronounced in disadvantaged schools. Alleviating staff shortages is a complex challenge and any successful attempt to address it will need to be based on a thorough analysis of its underlying causes. Ireland will, therefore, need to further strengthen its efforts to monitor the supply and demand of teachers and the factors that drive them. To guide central efforts to address teacher shortages in the short-, medium- and long-term, and to identify their potential disproportionate effect on disadvantaged students, the monitoring of teacher supply and demand must be strengthened. Furthermore, to ensure that the teaching profession reflects the diversity of Ireland's students, efforts to alleviate staff shortages should pay particular attention to attracting and retaining candidates from underrepresented groups. The DoE should, for instance, consider measures to improve retention, particularly among diverse teachers and those teaching in difficult environments. While research into the retention of diverse teachers remains limited, mentoring programmes designed specifically to meet the needs of teachers from ethnic minority backgrounds have shown some promise in improving their retention. Finally, greater flexibility in the recruitment of non-teaching staff could ease shortages among key support roles. For example, the DoE and Tusla could consider diversifying their approach to staffing HSCL Coordinator roles and widen the criteria for these positions (e.g. considering experienced youth workers and other professionals who work to support families), rather than relying fully on teacher-led provision. A more diverse approach to recruitment should also be considered for guidance counsellors.

Embed teachers' continuing professional learning within a professional improvement cycle and remove barriers to participation

The learning needs of disadvantaged students and how teachers in DEIS schools are expected to address them have evolved significantly, given the increasing diversity of learners, a greater emphasis on inclusion and the emergence of new, effective teaching practices. Teachers in DEIS schools can avail themselves of a range of professional learning opportunities that are specifically aimed at addressing the needs of students at risk of educational disadvantage. To harness the full potential and maximise the impact of these opportunities, continuing professional learning in Ireland must be more firmly embedded in teachers' professional improvement cycle. Introducing a system of formative appraisal could make an important contribution to capacity building in schools, to improve learner outcomes and the motivation among school staff. To further promote teachers' engagement in continuing professional learning activities and to recognise those that already do, Ireland should raise expectations for teachers' engagement in continuing professional learning. For instance, making professional development an explicit element of teachers' appraisal process and linking their regular evaluation to individual and school-wide professional learning plans could help to foster a school culture of continuing professional learning. Furthermore, raising expectations for teachers' engagement in continuing professional learning should go hand in hand with efforts to address existing barriers that limit their participation. This involves creating supportive structures – including effective approaches to substitution – that allow teachers to participate in continuing professional learning without compromising their classroom responsibilities.

Focus capacity-building efforts on priority areas both in and around DEIS schools

Meeting the rising and more complex needs of students and living up to a holistic vision of teaching and learning will require a continued emphasis on capacity building, particularly those serving the most disadvantaged students. Yet, there are limits to schools' capacity and responsibility for providing support to students and parents in an environment that is characterised by significant capacity shortages across a

range of social services. Therefore, a strategic student-centred approach to capacity building should be based on a reflection on the types of student support schools are best placed to provide themselves and for which students should be referred to other providers. Improved inter-agency collaboration and communication is also needed to systematically keep track of students' needs and the support they receive across a range of providers to identify additional needs and intervene as or before they arise. Given the limited resources, Ireland should seek to target its capacity building efforts to support teachers and principals in areas of greatest needs. Data generated through school inspections can provide an invaluable source of information in this process and *Oide* should build on the close relationship with the Inspectorate. Some of the schools serving students with the highest levels of need may also need further support to strengthen their administrative capacity. Furthermore, school leadership teams might benefit from additional peer-support and a more systematic exchange with other schools. Providing such opportunities to in-service principals could contribute to their continuing professional improvement, encourage them to update their skills and take on new challenges. Collectively, these efforts could strengthen the capacity of DEIS schools while ensuring that the needs of students at greatest risk of educational disadvantage are met regardless of the school they attend.

Strengthen equity in the provision of additional resources across schools

Ensuring that access to additional resources (e.g. breakfast clubs, sports activities, and music clubs, etc.) is equitable across different schools in Ireland is key to strengthening learning opportunities for all students. This may entail ensuring that highly disadvantaged students can have the same access to resources, regardless of their enrolment in DEIS or non-DEIS schools. To address this challenge, the DoE should consider how the differences in funding across DEIS and non-DEIS schools may impact the provision of these resources and consider options to tackle this gap. Such a process would require a comprehensive review of the costs associated with breakfast clubs, sports activities, and music clubs in schools that are able to offer them, to have an estimate of the expenses that institutions face to provide such services. This review should also encompass an examination of the financial burdens faced by families, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, in accessing these resources when offered by schools. To address the costs associated with the provision of the additional resources that they deem relevant, policy makers should explore the feasibility of integrating these expenses into the capitation grant for non-DEIS schools. By incorporating these costs into the capitation grant framework, the DoE could reduce financial barriers for schools and families, enriching opportunities for all students. In particular, these efforts would counterbalance the possible gap in support and resources for disadvantaged students across DEIS and non-DEIS schools. Alternatively, the DoE could consider incorporating funds to cover these resources in the context of a potential reform of the DEIS bands. In such case, resources to cover for these additional supports could be allocated to a selected number of bands based on an assessment of different schools' needs.

Strengthen the coordination of educational services with the health and therapeutic service provision to increase support for schools and families in meeting students' needs

The institutional supports for students with suspected special educational needs or more generally with mental health needs are under pressure in Ireland, facing challenges from both the side of the DoE and the Department of Health. Better planning is needed so that there are adequate numbers of personnel available to provide support within both sectors. Resources appear to lack coordination in how they deliver support to the students that need it. It would be important, for all of the relevant government Departments of Health, Education and Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth to collectively deliver on a joint policy, such as is the "Young Ireland 2023-2028" policy framework. Aligning adequate supports and resources for children with additional need, while simultaneously working to improve the system of support, so that barriers to access are removed, is fundamental. This is particularly important for students from

families with a disadvantaged background, as their families may not be able to afford private assessment or therapeutic supports. This would also support schools, which at times need to invest a significant amount of time to help families navigate the assessment/therapeutic support system, for instance by helping them fill out forms and applications.

Ireland should strengthen the coordination and integration of services across departments to better support students at risk of educational disadvantage, ensuring that the services of the DoE and Department of Health are aligned, coordinated and complement each other. This would require stronger co-operation between departments, and is not solely dependent on the DoE initiative.

Review additional costs of education to families to improve the accessibility of provisions

While education in Ireland is formally universally free, families can face significant costs as their children progress through education. Voluntary contributions, fees to access Transition Year, examination fees (although temporarily suspended), book costs for Senior Cycle, are all expenses that families may be facing to ensure their children stay in education. Official data on the overall amounts that families spend on these are not available at the national level. It would be important to obtain such information to understand the impact of this phenomenon on schools and potentially also families. In regard to voluntary contributions, the DoE should also account for the role that these contributions play in the funding of schools. It would be key to analyse data on how the contributions are used, what range of expenses they cover, and if they are necessary for the schools to provide what the DoE would consider the necessary standard of education provision. With respect to Transition Year fees, the DoE is currently conducting a review of access to and provision of Transition Year. Depending on the results of this analysis, the DoE should examine how to support disadvantaged students that may want to enrol in TY. These supports could be both financial and non-financial, as well as provided at the level of the individual student or school. Lastly, the DoE should re-evaluate examination fees. While these fees have not been requested in the past two years and there is an income-based exemption in place for children from lower-income families which do not need to pay, the DoE should take stock of the initiative. It should evaluate whether this policy has had any significant negative financial impact on the education system, accounting for the benefits it brought to families. If this has not occurred and the policy appears to be financially sustainable, the DoE should consider removing such fees completely to strengthen the system's free education principle.

Promote promising models and examples of engagement and collaboration with parents, families and communities

One way in which education systems can support schools is by providing them with guidance on how to involve parents and guardians from all backgrounds in the school community. The DoE could incentivise the sharing of practices, leveraging the experience that several schools have successfully developed. For instance, the DoE could take advantage of the experience of specific schools that were particularly successful in tackling student absenteeism or disengagement, or that designed innovative initiatives to engage parents and families. The DoE could rely on the support of the Inspectorate both to identify good practices in schools, and to circulate information and examples that can be of help to other schools. The Inspectorate would be best placed to identify virtuous examples through their evaluations, and, at the same time, they could share these examples with schools that they identify as needing support in the area of parental and community engagement.

Moreover, the DoE could consider specific measures that would foster the engagement of certain groups. This could be the expansion of the HSCL Scheme to schools with particular needs. The DoE could consider a partial expansion of the scheme, or its general mainstreaming, depending on the financial sustainability of this reform. A partial expansion of the scheme could focus on schools that have a particular need for this support, and should be developed in line with an eventual decision of the DoE to extend the supports

to all students defined as disadvantaged. A further option could be to provide cultural mediators[3] to schools with a high concentration of Traveller and Roma students. Cultural mediators can support schools and teachers to reach out to specific groups of students and their families, facilitate successful communication and promote positive relationships. Cultural mediators could be considered as partners to HSCL Coordinators in situations of particular needs, or to schools that do not have an HSCL Coordinator to foster their engagement with Traveller and Roma families. This would be in line with the practices that are being developed, for instance, under the Supporting Traveller and Roma projects.

Implement more comprehensive data integration and analysis in education policy making

While the primary goal of the DEIS programme is to address concentrations of disadvantage in schools, understanding what proportions of disadvantaged students are targeted by the DEIS programme, accounting for demographic and economic changes, is crucial for informed decision making. Moreover, it is important to know the level of socio-economic disadvantage among those who are and those who are not addressed by the DEIS programme. To this end, it might be useful to use a proxy for socio-economic background that distinguishes levels of disadvantage at a non-binary base. In the short-term, the HP Index data, already available to the DoE, could provide a practical solution to this challenge. It would provide more information on how students with a similar level of socio-economic disadvantage (of their residence) fare within DEIS and non-DEIS schools. It would also enhance analyses by focusing on various disadvantaged groups (e.g. Traveller and Roma students). However, in the long-term, merging of various datasets to broaden the understanding of currently non-observed aspects of socio-economic disadvantage might be needed. For instance, analysing other administrative sources, such as income data and social protection data, could provide a richer understanding of socio-economic contexts, and the complexity of the multifaceted challenges associated with educational disadvantage. Access to other databases could also lead to a quicker assessment of changing social and economic situations in particular areas. Finally, it is important to improve monitoring by utilising standardised assessments. This could enhance benchmarking of the achievements of DEIS schools with national norms and could help measure the effectiveness of schools. It could also shed more light on students' experiences progressing from DEIS primary to non-DEIS post-primary schools, and stimulate research into the effects of the DEIS label on students and teachers.

Promote research that could provide more information on the causal effects of the DEIS programme

Evaluations of the DEIS programme lack a control group and cannot provide causal implications of the programme on student and school outcomes. This has important policy implications. For instance, difficulties in establishing causal effects impede the accurate measurement of the DEIS programme's impact on student outcomes and raise questions about the allocation of resources. By collecting more data at the individual student level, gaining access to a broader range of student and household characteristics and assuming a conducive socio-political context, it might be possible for researchers to use a range of statistical techniques that can provide more information on the causal mechanisms of the DEIS programme. Regression discontinuity design is a quasi-experimental method that exploits a discontinuity in the data by dividing the studied population into treatment and control groups based on whether participants fall above or below a specified threshold or cut-off point. Given that the DEIS programme has a specific school-level cut-off point for new entrant schools, regression discontinuity could be explored to estimate the programme's effects on school outcomes. Synthetic cohort matching is another method to estimate causal effects by creating a comparison group that resembles the treatment group in observed characteristics. If the DoE broadens the pool of administrative data and accesses a wider range of observable characteristics of students, there may be merit in considering how this technique could be used to estimate the effects of the DEIS programme on student outcomes. It could also be applied in combination

with the difference-in-differences method that involves selecting two groups or areas, a treated and a control group, and comparing their outcomes before and after a programme, practice or policy implementation. However, in the event that data fail to meet some of the assumptions associated with these statistical techniques, their applications may be restricted.

Strengthen the use of data at the school level

Strengthening the use of data at the school level is paramount for informed decision-making and effective policy implementation. However, despite the emphasis on data utilisation through the DEIS action planning process, some schools face challenges in analysing this information and formulating SMART targets that are both meaningful and realistic within their specific contexts. The challenges persist due to uncertainties in regard to the use and analysis of data, and the monitoring and evaluation of the targets set. Therefore, schools require additional guidance to enhance their capacity in these aspects. Continuing professional learning activities in this area should be highly applicable, and ideally, participants should use data that are regularly available to them. To this end, working in teams with other school staff members is a promising strategy for implementing data use in schools. Improving the clarity on the interface between school self-evaluation and DEIS action planning was also identified as essential for facilitating school improvement. A comprehensive approach is needed to address these challenges, involving on-going professional development for teachers and principals, clear guidance on setting SMART targets, and improved coordination between self-evaluation and action-planning processes. Thus, improving the use of data in schools should not only involve training for current and prospective principals (as is now offered by *Oide*) but also external supports provided at a local or central level to school staff members from multiple schools.

Notes

[1] Early leaver from education and training refers to a person aged 18 to 24 who has completed at most lower secondary education and is not involved in further education or training. It is expressed as a percentage out of the total population aged 18 to 24.

[2] Parents/guardians do not pay for school books up to Junior Cycle.

[3] Cultural mediation is a well-known concept and widely used strategy among a variety of institutions and organisations in countries across the OECD. Cultural mediators can support schools and teachers to reach out to specific groups of students and their families, facilitate successful communication and promote positive relationships. They resemble the Community Education Workers in the Supporting Traveller and Roma project in Ireland.

1 An overview of equity and inclusion in the education system

This chapter provides an overview of equity and inclusion in the Irish education system. It outlines the economic and social context, and the structure of the education system from early childhood education and care to post-primary education, including special education, alternative educational provision and provision for learners disengaged from education. It describes the DEIS programme in detail, from its conception through a significant review in 2017 to more recent refinements. Finally, the chapter focuses on the education system's performance, elaborating on challenges relating to educational outcomes for children and young people related to socio-economic background, gender and immigrant status. It also examines the performance of Irish Traveller and Roma students, well-being, and progression beyond post-primary education.

Introduction

Ireland has a centralised education system where the central body, the Department of Education (DoE), is directly responsible for some school-level administration, such as allocating funding to schools, assigning teaching posts and ensuring quality education (Department of Education, 2024[1]; OECD, 2020[2]). State-funded education is available at all levels in Ireland. Early childhood education and care (ECEC) typically starts at age three or four, and while it is not compulsory, there is a very high take-up of ECEC for the two years before the transition to primary school (Department of Education, 2024[1]). Primary education (ISCED 1) lasts eight years, lower secondary (ISCED 2) three years and upper secondary (ISCED 3) two to three years, depending on whether the optional Transition Year is taken (ibid.). Lower and upper secondary education in Ireland are called Junior and Senior Cycle, respectively, collectively labelled post-primary education, a terminology adopted also in this review (Figure 1.1). Special education settings are also available at all levels. Education is compulsory for children 6 to 16 or until students have completed three years of post-primary education (ibid.). Most children begin primary school at the age of five, following two years of free universal preschool provision. Further details are provided in the following sections. Education beyond Senior Cycle is generally outside the scope of this review. Furthermore, while the review does not focus on provisions for students with special educational needs, it does cover the provision of supports for students with special educational needs in mainstream schools who experience disadvantage.

Figure 1.1. Structure of the education system
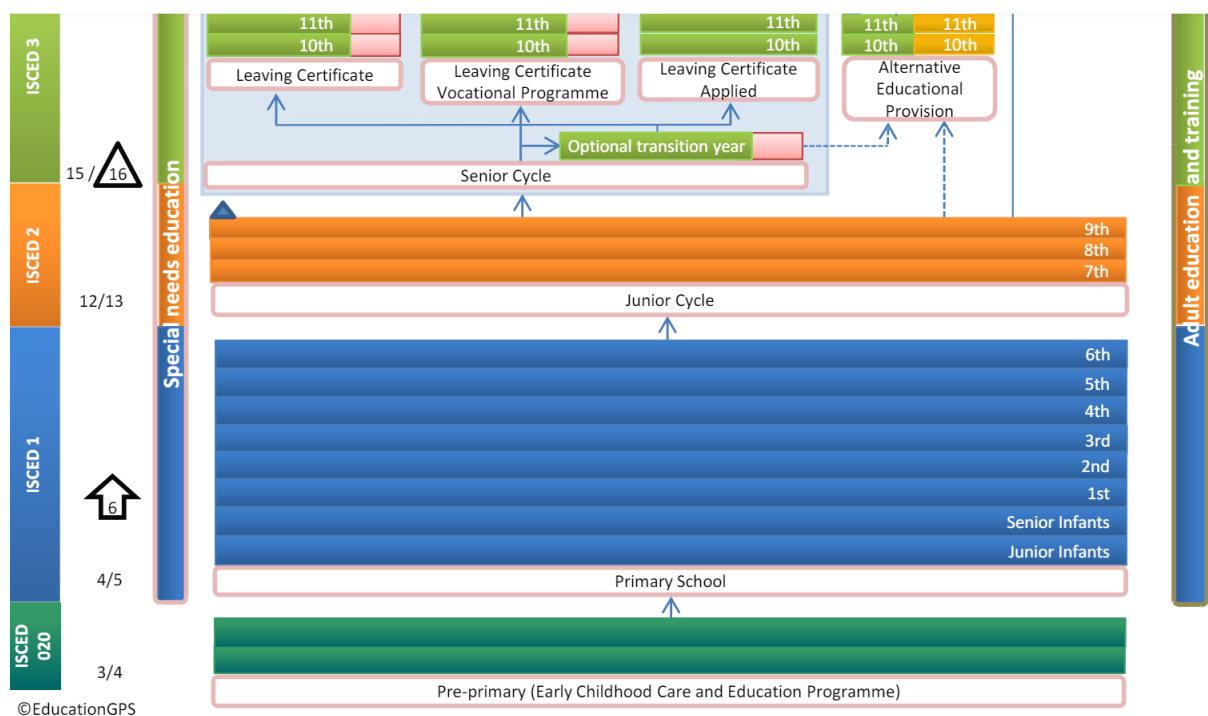
Note: The numbers next to educational levels display theoretical starting ages. Six is the starting age of compulsory education and 16 is the ending age.
Source: Adapted from OECD (2023[3]), Education GPS Ireland, https://gpseducation.oecd.org/CountryProfile?primaryCountry=IRL (accessed on 30 November 2023).

There are several state bodies and agencies operating under the aegis of the DoE. Of particular relevance to this review is the work by the Educational Research Centre as well as the State Examinations

Commission, National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), the Teaching Council, and the National Council for Special Education.

Furthermore, the Inspectorate plays an important role in the education system. Inspections are carried out to improve the quality of education provision for children and young people, and to support the development of the Irish education system (Department of Education, 2021[4]). The DoE Inspectorate does this by providing evaluation, analysis, support and advice concerning education provision, mainly in the early years, primary and post-primary levels. Inspectors also provide advice on a range of education issues to school communities, policy makers in the DoE and the broader education system (ibid.). In addition to improvement, the Inspectorate also promotes accountability in the education system. It does this through quality assuring and reporting about quality, standards, educational opportunities and experiences, and issues of educational equity. More information about the Inspectorate is provided in Chapters 2 and 6.

Economic and social context

Ireland is located in north-western Europe. It has a total area of around 70 thousand square kilometres. Ireland also includes the Aran Islands, the Blasket Islands and other smaller islands. It is surrounded by the Atlantic Ocean to the west, the Celtic Seas to the south, the Irish Sea to the east and to the north shares a land border with Northern Ireland (United Kingdom). The Irish population of approximately five million people resides in a mix of urban (64%) and rural (36%) settings. The capital city, Dublin, is the largest urban centre. Almost half of the Irish population (40%) lives in the greater Dublin area: Dublin city and county, Wicklow, Kildare and Meath (Department of Education, 2024[1]). Other major cities include Cork, Limerick, Galway and Waterford. English and Irish are the two official languages of the Irish state. Following the Irish Sign Language Act 2017, the Irish sign language is also recognised in the country (Government of Ireland, 2017[5]).

Ireland's economy is resilient

Ireland's economy has shown resilience in recent years, specifically during the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine. The government's COVID-19 response, characterised by robust measures to protect households and businesses, contributed to the economy weathering these challenges successfully (OECD, 2022[6]). The recovery post-lockdown was particularly buoyed by strong exports from the multinational sector and high vaccination rates (ibid.). However, the re-opening also brought about inflationary pressures, initially driven by elevated energy prices but now more broadly based, especially evident in transport and service costs and rising property prices (ibid.).

Despite inflation concerns, Ireland's labour markets have also demonstrated resilience, with employment levels at a record high at the end of the second quarter of 2023 (CSO, 2023[7]). However, labour shortages, notably in sectors like construction, pose challenges (OECD, 2022[6]). While labour force participation improved for youth and women, those with lower educational attainment struggle to secure and retain employment (Figure 1.2).

Figure 1.2. Employment rates by educational attainment and gender (%)

Panel A: Men

- Below upper secondary education
- Upper secondary or post-secondary non-tertiary education
- Tertiary education

Panel B: Women

- Below upper secondary education
- Upper secondary or post-secondary non-tertiary education
- Tertiary education
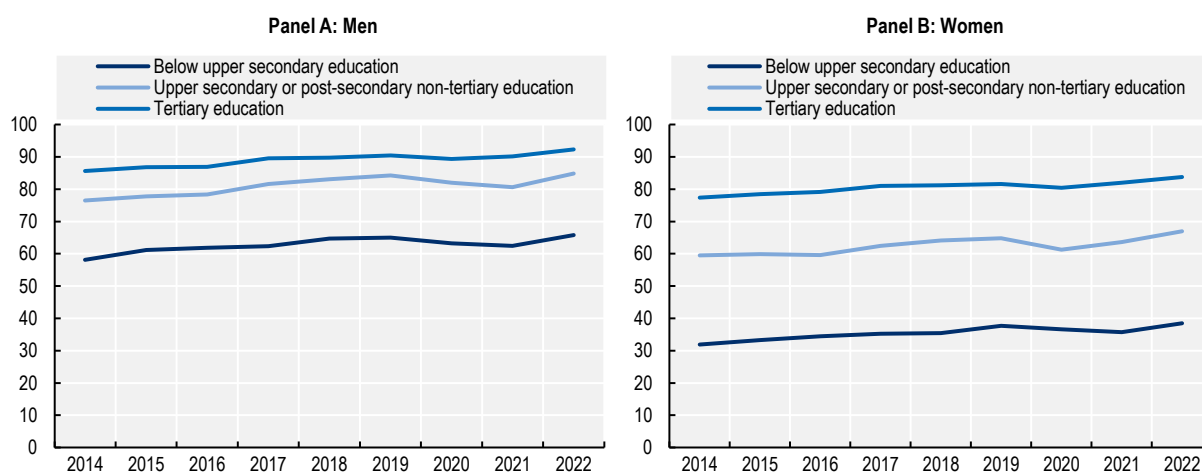
Source: OECD (2024[8]), OECD.stat: Trends in employment, unemployment and inactivity rates, by educational attainment and age group, https://stats.oecd.org/ (accessed on 29 January 2024).

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As the economy rebounded strongly, Ireland was able to withdraw COVID-19 support measures. Indeed, it went from a fiscal deficit of -1.6% of gross domestic product (GDP) in 2021 to a surplus of 1.6% in 2022, thanks to excess corporate tax receipts (OECD, 2022[6]; OECD, 2023[9]). The deficit in 2021 was considerably lower than the average fiscal balance across Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries of that year (-7.5%) (OECD, 2023[9]). In addition, its public debt as a share of GDP was also below the OECD average in 2021 (65.5% against 120.8%) and declined to 46.7% in 2022 (ibid.).

Increasingly ageing population might put a strain on public finances

The number of inhabitants in Ireland has been rising, from around 3.8 million in 2000 to approximately 5.1 million in 2022 (OECD, 2023[10]). The population is projected to increase further, reaching 5.4 million in 2030, 5.8 million in 2040, 6.0 million in 2050 and 6.1 million in 2060 (ibid.). As in many other OECD countries, the trend of population growth will be accompanied by ageing. It is predicted that the share of people aged 65 and older will increase from 15.1% in 2022 to 21.5% in 2040 and then to 27.5% in 2061 (ibid.). Panel B in Figure 1.3 illustrates that while this course is visible in the United Kingdom and on average across OECD countries, the trend in Ireland is steeper and will "overtake" the OECD average around 2050. In contrast, the share of the population in ECEC and most of compulsory education (0-14 year-olds) is predicted to decrease from 19.5% in 2022 to 15.3% in 2040, increase slightly to about 15.6% in 2050 and then drop again to 14.1% by 2061 (panel A in Figure 1.3).

Figure 1.3. Projected population shares (%)

| Panel A: Projected share of population 0-14 years | Panel B: Projected share of population 65 and over |
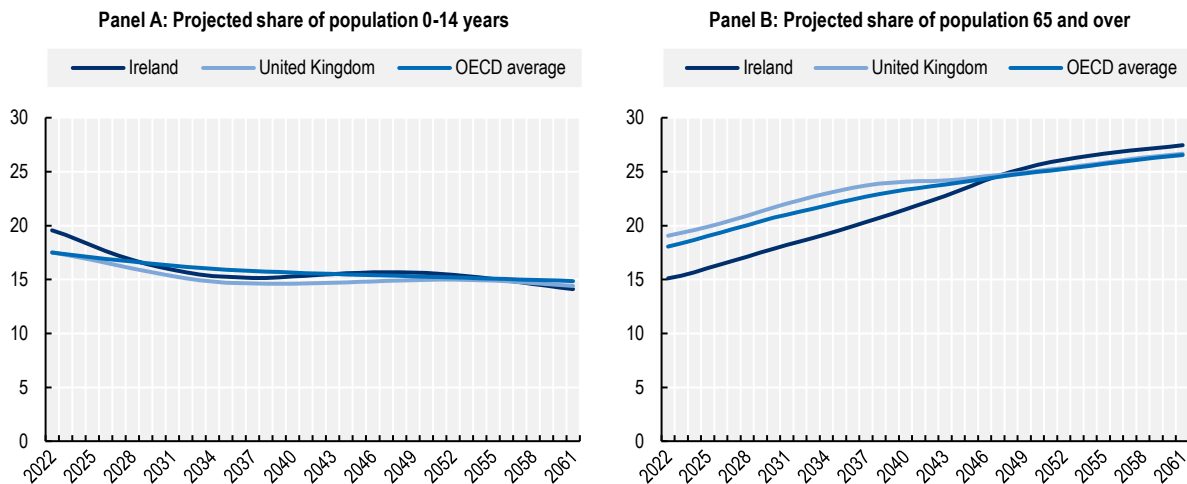
Source: OECD (2023[10]), OECD.stat: Population projections, https://stats.oecd.org/ (accessed on 30 November 2023).

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The projected demographic trends might impact the reallocation of public resources among competing priorities. With student numbers decreasing, there may be a shift in public resources towards pension schemes and healthcare. In 2020, Ireland spent 2.2% of GDP on primary to secondary educational institutions, compared to 3.6% on average across the OECD (OECD, 2024[11]). This represents a decrease compared to 2015, when Ireland spent 2.4% of GDP on primary to secondary educational institutions (3.4% on average across OECD countries) (ibid.).

However, Ireland's GDP is boosted by exports from multinationals based in the country and is volatile due to investment spending by multinational firms (OECD, 2022[6]). GDP has been regarded as a less useful measure of economic activity given the globalised nature of the economy and the significant share of the economy that is made up of profits generated by multi-national corporations (Department of Education, n.d.[12]). Other indicators of education spending might, therefore, be more appropriate. To address some of the limitations of GDP, an alternative way of measuring the performance and growth of the Irish economy has been developed by the Irish Central Statistics Office. The Modified Gross National Income (GNI*) provides a measure of the size of the Irish economy specifically adjusted to lessen the impact of globalisation activities that disproportionately affect Irish economic aggregates. GNI* is defined as GNI less factor income of redomiciled companies, less depreciation on research and development service imports and trade in intellectual property, and less depreciation on aircraft leasing. Education expenditure as a percentage of GNI* stood at 5.3% in 2019 and 5.8% in 2015 (ibid.).

Other measures can focus on the share of expenditure on education as a share of government expenditure rather than national output. In 2020, as a percentage of total government expenditure, Ireland spent 8.1% on primary to secondary education, compared to 7.5% on average across OECD countries (in 2015, 8.1% and 7.7% in Ireland and on average across OECD countries, respectively) (OECD, 2024[13]).

Related to the demographics are migration trends. The migration landscape has undergone significant transformations, particularly in the first decade of the 21st century, marked by a notable surge in immigration until 2007 (Figure 1.4). Since then, net migration has been decreasing until 2011. After, net migration increased, with the number of people coming into the country again overtaking the number of people leaving in 2015. In 2023, the number of immigrants, standing at 141.6 thousand in April, has been the highest since 2007. More than half (53%) were aged between 25 and 44 years (CSO, 2023[14]). Children

aged 0 to 14 constituted 15% of the immigrants in 2023 (ibid.). To a great extent, this latest increase is a result of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine. Indeed, 18 266 Ukrainian students had been enrolled in schools across Ireland at the end of April 2024 (Department of Education, 2024[15]). Out of that figure, 11 349 had been accommodated in primary schools and 6 917 in post-primary schools (ibid.).

Figure 1.4. Migration trends in Ireland 1993-2023
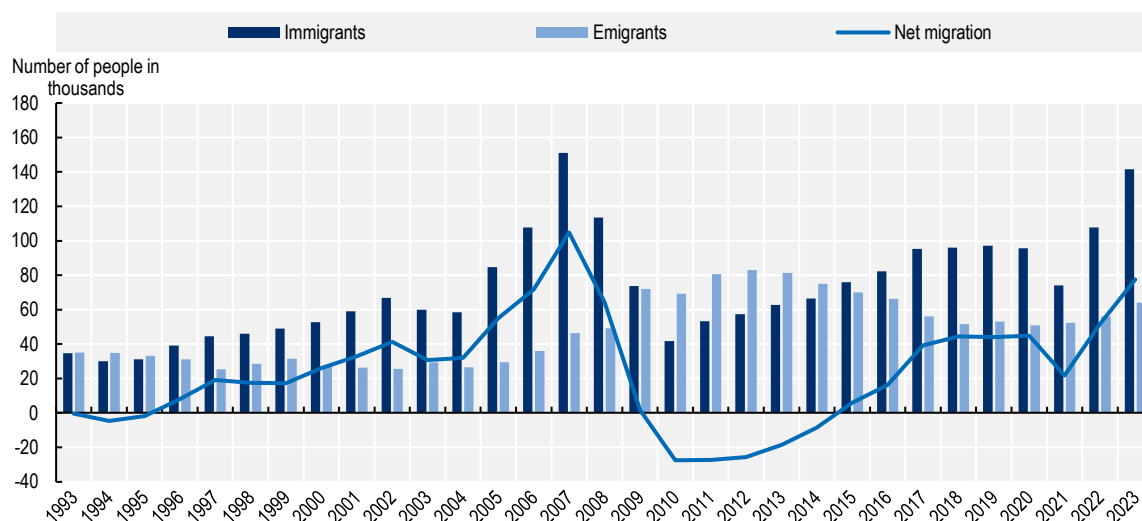
Note: Net migration is the difference between immigrants and emigrants.
Source: CSO (2023[16]), Annual Population Change, https://ws.cso.ie/public/api.restful/PxStat.Data.Cube_API.ReadDataset/PEA15/XLSX/2007/en (accessed on 30 November 2023).

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The demographic fabric of Ireland has evolved into a more heterogeneous composition, encompassing diverse nationalities, languages, ethnicities and religious affiliations. The inflow includes returning Irish nationals, UK nationals, other EU nationals and individuals from various other countries, including Ukrainians. Indeed, the number of immigrants from non-UK non-EU countries rose from 16.1 thousand in 2021 to 81.1 thousand in 2023 (CSO, 2023[14]). The inflow of Ukrainian citizens contributed to this significantly (ibid.). This influx also adds to the population growth described above, and the migration trends carry implications for education policies and practices in Ireland.

Inaccessible housing presents complex challenges

Housing and homelessness pose complex challenges in Ireland. The increase in housing prices in recent years has escalated affordability concerns, exacerbated by a housing stock that has struggled to keep pace with the rising number of households, particularly for lower-income families (OECD, 2022[6]). Housing for All, the current national housing policy, marks a step change in the levels of investment in public housing. It puts a significant emphasis on increasing homeownership, marking a departure from earlier policies. However, the endeavour to enhance residential accommodation faces obstacles, including a cumbersome regulatory and planning system, judicial reviews impeding housing development, elevated construction costs, and a demand for workers in the construction sector surpassing supply (ibid.). Some of these issues are being addressed by the Planning and Development Bill 2023 (Houses of the Oireachtais, 2024[17]). It aims to bring greater clarity, consistency and certainty to how planning decisions are made (ibid.). It puts plan making at the centre and aims to improve the functioning of the planning system whilst protecting public participation (ibid.).

Persistent housing shortages have led to a situation where real house prices and the ratio of house prices to income are rising, affecting housing affordability. High housing-related costs, accounting for 25.6% of total household costs compared to the OECD average of 22.6% in 2021, and a significant portion of the population (19.6% in 2020) spending over 40% of disposable income on private rents further exacerbate the situation (OECD, 2022[6]). In contrast, the housing cost overburden rate (proportion of households paying 40% or more of disposable income on housing costs) stood at 0.9% in 2022, compared to 4.3% on average across European Union (EU) countries (Eurostat, 2024[18]). Nevertheless, the number of years of gross disposable income an average household requires to purchase a 100-square-metre dwelling is notably high at 16.3 in 2021, ranking among the highest in the EU (European Commission, 2022[19]). Budget allocations for 2024 reflect the government's commitment to addressing housing supply and affordability, including measures on rents and social housing (Department of Public Expenditure, 2023[20]).

Lack of affordable and social housing also impacts homelessness. The Department of Housing's Homelessness report indicates record levels of homelessness, with almost 10 000 adults accessing local authority funded emergency accommodation in 2023 (Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, 2023[21]). Young adults aged 18-24 experienced a staggering 101.7% increase between 2019 and 2023 (Figure 1.5). The number of dependants (children) accessing local authority managed emergency accommodation also rose from 3 422 to 3 962 in the four years. The Dublin region bears a disproportionate burden, hosting 72.2% of adults and 76.2% of child dependants in homeless accommodation (ibid.).

Figure 1.5. Individuals accessing local authority managed emergency accommodation
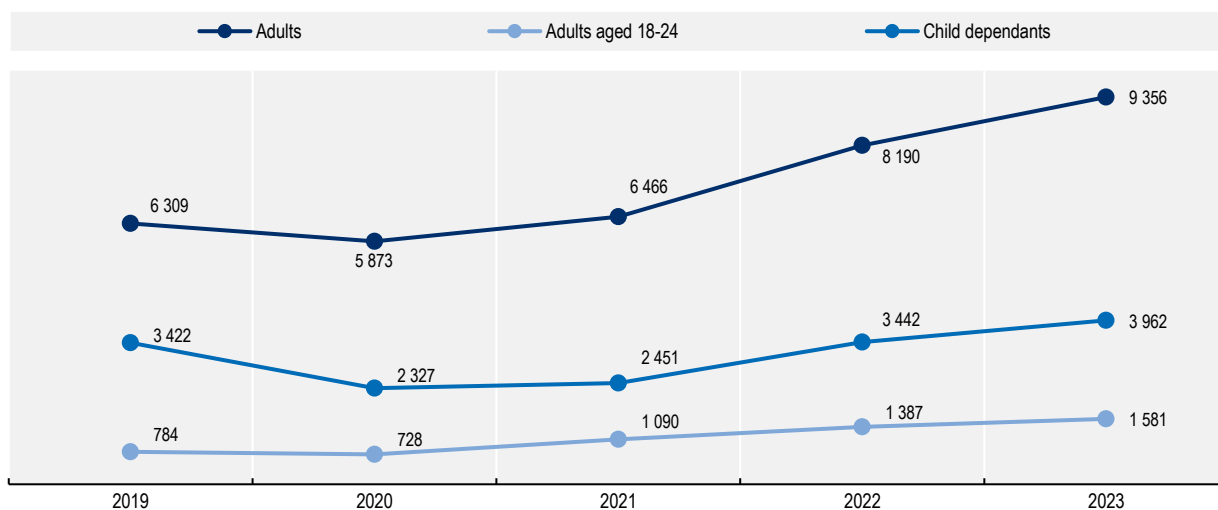
Note: The data capture details of individuals in state-funded emergency accommodation arrangements overseen by local authorities.
Source: Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (2024[22]), Homelessness data, https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/80ea8-homelessness-data/ (accessed on 29 January 2024).

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Homelessness critically impacts students' education and well-being. Sub-standard living conditions combined with inadequate rest and poor access to nutritious food affect students' ability to attend and perform at school (Scanlon and McKenna, 2018[23]). These factors contribute to irritability, exhaustion and low self-esteem, severely impacting their academic engagement and participation (ibid.). Furthermore, the uncertainty and displacement of homelessness often lead to behavioural changes in children, such as increased agitation and comfort-seeking behaviours, further hindering their educational development

(ibid.). The approach to supporting families and children experiencing homelessness involves a multi-agency approach and several Irish departments and agencies are responsible for the delivery of supports to these families (e.g. Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage; Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth; Tusla - the Child and Family Agency; Health Service Executive (publicly funded healthcare system in Ireland) and the DoE). Moreover, Housing for All commits to providing enhanced tenancy sustainment supports for families in long-term homelessness to help them exit emergency accommodation and maintain their tenancies. Two pilots will take place in 2024 in Dublin and Galway that will support families with additional needs to move from emergency accommodation into their own accommodation with wraparound supports (Department of Education, 2024[1]).

All of these factors shape the social situation of Irish citizens. In 2022, approximately one in five individuals were at risk of poverty and social exclusion in Ireland and on average across the EU (20.7% and 21.6%, respectively) (Eurostat, 2023[24]). In Ireland, the rate has been decreasing, dropping from 25.4% in 2015 to 20.7% in 2022 (ibid.). Similarly, the share of children aged 0-16 at risk of poverty and social exclusion has decreased from 28.7% to 22.9% (ibid.). The risk of poverty and social exclusion is not dependent just on a household's level of income (Eurostat, 2023[25]). It also reflects joblessness, low work intensity, working status and other socio-economic characteristics (ibid.). Overall, women, people with a low level of educational attainment and unemployed persons were more likely to be at risk of poverty or social exclusion (ibid.). The OECD Education for Inclusive Societies project considers the ways through which education is related to broader societal outcomes (see Annex A).

The Delivering Equality of Opportunity In Schools (DEIS) programme is a DoE intervention to combat educational disadvantage and to promote social inclusion in education (Department of Education, 2017[26]). Initiated in 2005, it focuses on schools with a high concentration of students facing socio-economic challenges. Depending on the level of disadvantage and location of the school (urban/rural), the DEIS programme provides additional resources, such as smaller classes, access to the Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) Scheme, the School Meals and the School Completion Programmes, a range of literacy and numeracy supports, and access to continuing professional learning (not all listed resources are available to all DEIS schools, see the DEIS programme section for more information). Emphasising early intervention, the DEIS programme seeks to address educational disadvantage with a commitment to fostering parental involvement for a supportive learning environment. The following sections describe the structure of the education system and the DEIS programme in greater detail.

Structure of the education system

Ireland has a centralised education system with schools and the central government being responsible for almost all educational decisions, and with only a very limited regional layer of educational administration (OECD, 2020[2]). This type of structure can impact the level of school autonomy. In 2022, Irish principals of 15-year-old students perceived a lower level of school autonomy compared to the average across OECD countries (OECD, 2023[27]). Irish principals also perceived lower levels of school responsibility for resources (ibid.). In contrast, principals reported comparable levels of school responsibility for curriculum (ibid.).

The centralised nature of the education system also has implications for educational funding, which flows from the central government directly to schools (OECD, 2023[3]). Teachers, special needs assistants, and primary and secondary school secretaries, as well as their pensions, are paid either directly by the DoE, or by the relevant regional Education and Training Boards (Chapter 2) with funding received from the DoE (Department of Education, 2023[28]; OECD, 2020[2]). Most publicly funded schools also receive direct payments to cover the salaries of administrative and caretaker staff and grants to cover day-to-day running costs (e.g. heating, cleaning and maintenance). Funding is provided to schools at a level determined by the DoE to be sufficient to fund schools' everyday costs, with enhanced payments provided in recent years to offset increased costs, such as energy prices.

Private organisations play a significant role in educational provision in Ireland: state-funded schools are owned and managed by private organisations (mainly church authorities and religious organisations at the primary level, with greater diversity at the secondary level), although the diversity of school ownership at primary level is slowly increasing (OECD, 2020[2]). Additionally, while most children in Ireland attend state-funded schools, some are educated in alternative educational provisions: at home or in non-recognised schools (independent (private) schools).

In regard to school governance structure, all schools have a patron. The patron is the body that establishes and operates the school, and is responsible for the school's characteristic spirit and ethos (e.g. Catholic, Church of Ireland, Multi/Inter Denominational) (Department of Education, 2024[1]). The patron does not have a direct role in the day-to-day management which is, in most schools, a matter for the board of management, appointed by the patron. Indeed, while the DoE sanctions teaching posts and pays teacher salaries, the board of management is the employer of teachers, and is responsible for their recruitment and dismissal. The board of management also must have regard to the efficient use of resources and accountability to students, their parents, the patron, staff and the community served by the school. The principal is responsible for the management of the school, including providing guidance and direction to the teachers and other staff (ibid.). More information on school management structure is provided in Chapter 2.

Early childhood education and care

The Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) is mainly responsible for ECEC. The Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) universal non-compulsory programme provides children with their first formal experience of early learning before commencing primary school (Department of Education, 2024[1]). It lasts two years, is available to all children within the eligible age range[1], and is free of charge for three hours per day, five days per week over 38 weeks per year from September to June each year. The ECCE programme is delivered by a range of private, community and voluntary entities (e.g. crèches, nurseries, pre-schools, *naíonraí* (Irish language preschools), playgroups and day-care services), and the provision of education is inspected by the Inspectorate (ibid.). In 2021, enrolment rates were above the OECD and EU25 averages for 3 to 5 year-olds (Table 1.1).

Table 1.1. Enrolment rates of 3-5 year-olds in ECEC and primary education (2021)

	Age 3	Age 4	Age 5
Ireland	87.7	97.5	100.0
United Kingdom	100.0	100.0	98.9
OECD average	73.7	88.0	95.1
EU25 average	80.3	91.6	94.7

Source: OECD (2023[29]), Education at a Glance 2023: OECD Indicators, Table B2.1., https://doi.org/10.1787/e13bef63-en.

The Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) has been established to create a more inclusive environment in ECCE settings, providing different levels of universal and targeted support in response to children's needs (disabilities in particular) and the specific preschool context (Government of Ireland, 2024[30]; OECD, 2021[31]). Furthermore, the Equal Participation Model, due to commence in 2024, will aim to help children and their families who may be experiencing disadvantage access early learning and childcare settings through a range of supports, universal and targeted (Government of Ireland, 2023[32]).

At the same time, the DoE provides targeted specialist preschool provision, such as Early Start, a one-year programme offered in some primary schools in some disadvantaged areas (Department of Education, 2024[1]). The programme is aimed at children aged between 3 and 5 years who are at risk of not reaching their potential in school (ibid.).

Primary education

Primary education in Ireland consists of an 8-year cycle: junior infants, senior infants, and first to sixth classes (Figure 1.1 above). Although children are not statutorily obliged to begin education until age six, most children start primary education at five, with almost all having availed of two years of free preschool care and education (Department of Education, 2024[1]). There is free school choice in Ireland, but children typically attend their local primary school. However, there is some evidence that some groups, such as those with an immigrant background, have had difficulties in finding places due to oversubscription and prioritisation of children of previous students (Smyth et al., 2009[33]). These concerns were addressed by the Admissions to Schools Act 2018, which provides a framework for school enrolment (Government of Ireland, 2018[34]). It is designed to ensure that every student is treated fairly and that the way in which schools decide on applications for admission is structured, fair and transparent (ibid.). A key feature of the Act is that schools must accept all applicants unless oversubscribed (ibid.). The Act requires schools to explicitly state in their admission policy that they will not discriminate against an applicant for admission on several grounds, provided for under equality legislation (ibid.). Schools have the responsibility for setting and publishing their admissions policy, and for handling enrolments (Department of Education, 2024[1]). Parents can submit enrolment applications to multiple schools but cannot accept more than one place (ibid.).

The primary education curriculum aims to provide a broad learning experience and encourages a rich variety of teaching and learning approaches that cater to the different needs of individual students (Department of Education, 2024[1]). It is designed to nurture students in all dimensions of their lives – spiritual, moral, cognitive, emotional, imaginative, aesthetic, social and physical (ibid.).

Standardised assessments are administered to all students in second, fourth and sixth classes in both English-medium and Irish-medium schools (Department of Education, 2024[1]). While these assessments are required at the specified class levels, many schools also conduct standardised tests in first, third and fifth classes as part of their own assessment processes. The standardised assessments evaluate students' progress and achievement in English, reading and mathematics. In Irish medium schools, Irish reading is also assessed. The tests are normed for the Irish population.

The aggregate results are reported to the school board of management (and the DoE), shared with parents/guardians, and used for school self-evaluation and on-going planning. Schools can make reasonable accommodations for students if the principal determines it is in the student's best interest, particularly for those with learning disabilities, physical impairments and students with an immigrant background facing language barriers. Examples of accommodations include reading assistance, a quiet testing environment outside the classroom and timers to allow for movement breaks during the test (ibid.).

The Irish education system is characterised by a very large number of small primary schools. There are over four times the number of primary as post-primary schools due to the predominance of small schools at that level. In 2022/23, over 40% of primary schools had fewer than 100 students and more than 65% had fewer than 200 students (Figure 1.6). This structure might be put under pressure under the most recent DoE student population projections. According to 2023 estimates, primary enrolments are projected to decrease by 77 952 students between the 2023/24 and 2036/37 school years, reaching a low point of 478 152 by 2036 (Department of Education, 2024[35]). The sharpest falls are predicted to be in the early period and will average 8 150 students per year between 2024 and 2030, with enrolments expected to rise again after 2037 (ibid.).

Figure 1.6. Distribution of school size at primary level (2022/23)

Number of schools in size category

[Bar chart showing:
1-50: 18.2%
51-100: 22.5%
101-200: 24.5%
201-300: 16.8%
301-400: 7.9%
401-500: 6.0%
More than 500: 4%]

School size
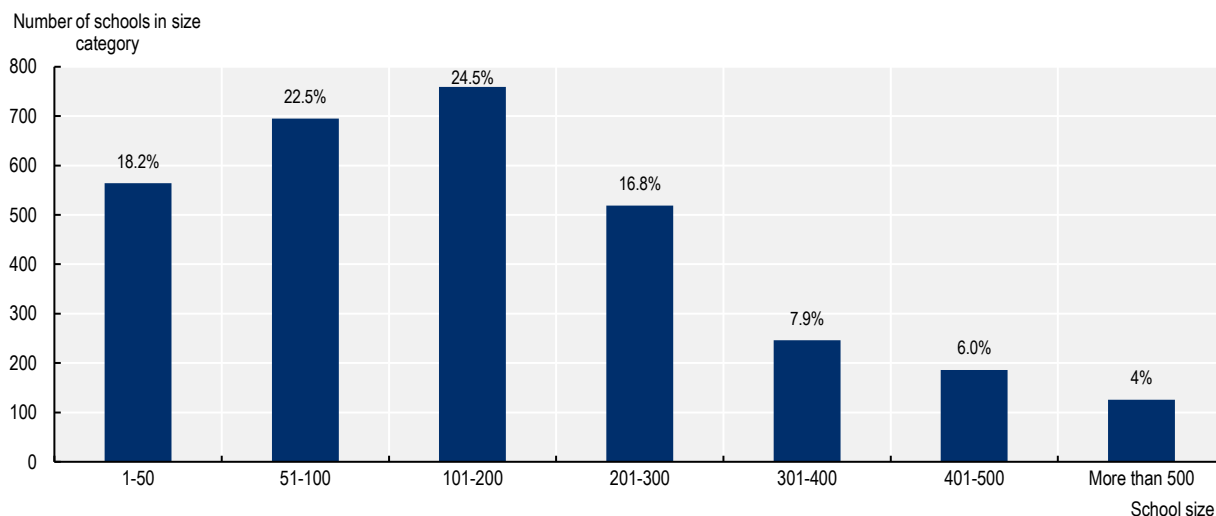
Source: Department of Education (2023[36]), Primary schools enrolment figures: 2022/2023, https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/primary-schools/ (accessed on 1 December 2023).

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A distinctive feature of the Irish education system is the presence of both single-sex and co-educational (mixed-gender) schools. In 2022/23, out of 3 095 primary schools, there were 85 all-girls (41 DEIS) and 145 all-boys schools (74 DEIS) (Department of Education, 2023[36]). The DoE encourages local consultation concerning potential change of status to co-educational (mixed-gender) schooling. However, it is ultimately the patrons' responsibility to conduct any necessary consultations they consider suitable and to make the final decision on whether to adopt this change (Houses of the Oireachtas, 2024[37]). New schools are established by the DoE to meet demographic needs, and, generally, such new school provision is mixed-gender in nature (ibid.).

Post-primary education

Students from about 12 to 18 years old typically attend secondary education in a post-primary school (Department of Education, 2024[1]). The minimum school leaving age is 16 or after three years of secondary education, whichever is later. Students and their guardians/parents apply to post-primary schools freely. Around half of students at this level do not attend their nearest school (Smyth, 2017[38]). In schools that are oversubscribed, a selection process might be necessary. Schools are legally required to set out their selection criteria (Government of Ireland, 2018[34]). While the DoE does not intervene in the selection criteria applied by schools, selection is often based on the following factors (Smyth, 2017[38]):

- students that attended certain primary schools;
- students living in a particular catchment area;
- siblings are currently or were previously enrolled in the school.

Irish post-primary education consists of three-year Junior Cycle (lower secondary education), followed by a two- or three-year Senior Cycle (upper secondary education), depending on whether the optional Transition Year is taken (Department of Education, 2024[1]).

Junior Cycle

Junior Cycle caters for 12-15-year-old students. It was introduced on a phased basis between September 2014 and September 2021 (Department of Education, 2024[1]). It features revised subjects and short courses, a focus on key skills, and new approaches to assessment and reporting. Schools have more freedom to design junior cycle programmes that meet the learning needs of all children and young people. For young people, the junior cycle curriculum available in their schools is a mix of subjects, short courses and other learning experiences. Core elements of the curriculum include English, Irish, Mathematics, History and Wellbeing (ibid.).

The programme has a balanced approach to assessment throughout the three years, focusing on on-going formative assessment, classroom-based assessments, and assessment tasks in all subject and course components (Department of Education, 2024[39]). At the end, students complete the Junior Cycle examination. It is a state-wide assessment developed through a process that ensures the alignment between the requirements of the relevant syllabi and assessment standards (Department of Education, 2024[1]). Junior Cycle culminates in the Junior Cycle Profile of Achievement award that captures student achievements in several assessment elements undertaken over the three years, including grades in the final examinations, classroom-based assessments in subjects and short courses, other learning programmes and a reporting on Wellbeing (Department of Education, 2023[40]).

Senior Cycle

Senior Cycle caters for 15-18-year-old students. Senior Cycle includes an optional Transition Year (TY) that follows immediately after the completion of Junior Cycle (Department of Education, 2024[1]). TY provides an opportunity for students to experience a wide range of educational inputs, including life skills, personal, social and academic development and experience of adult and working life, over a year free from formal examinations (ibid.). Each school designs its own TY programme, within set guidelines, to suit the needs and interests of its students. In developing it, schools are advised to consider students' needs, parents' views, employers and the broader interests of the local community (ibid.). Participating in TY is common in Ireland, with 79.2% of students taking it in 2022/23 (Department of Education and Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, 2024[41]). While evidence is limited, financial expenses related to TY fees and other related expenses (e.g. optional school trips) can pose a challenge for participation in TY for some families (ISSU, 2014[42]). The DoE is aware of the challenges related to access to and expenses for participation in TY, is conducting a review of TY, and the Minister for Education has committed to making it universally available (Department of Education, 2023[43]). Further details are provided in Chapter 5.

During the final two years of Senior Cycle, students take one of three programmes (Leaving Certificate Established, Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme and Leaving Certificate Applied Programme), each leading to a state examination (Department of Education, 2024[1]). Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) provides access to further education and training (ISCED 4) and other training options[2] but does not provide direct access to higher education (ISCED 5 and above) (OECD, 2023[3]). The other two certificates provide access to both further education and training, as well as higher education (ibid.).

In 2022/23, most students took Leaving Certificate Established (66.6%), followed by Leaving Certificate Vocational (27.0%) and Leaving Certificate Applied (6.4%) (Department of Education, 2023[44]). Each pathway has a standardised assessment taken by all candidates under the same conditions and at the same time, except where appropriate accommodations have been provided (Department of Education, 2024[1]). They are curriculum-based examinations with various components, including written, oral and practical examinations, and coursework projects. All of these components are externally set and marked. The marking of the written examinations and most coursework is anonymous. The marking of oral examinations and some practical work is carried out by visiting examiners. Students with permanent or

long-term disabilities or medical conditions, including visual and hearing difficulties or specific learning difficulties, which they believe will significantly impair their performance in examinations, can apply to the State Examinations Commission for reasonable accommodation(s) to facilitate them in taking state examinations (ibid.).

Leaving Certificate Established is a two-year programme that aims to provide students with a broad and balanced education while offering some specialisation towards a particular career option (Department of Education, 2024[1]). The programme assesses subjects through a state-wide final examination paper and, depending on the subject, additional assessment methods, including oral and aural examinations, practical examinations and an assessment of practical coursework at the end of the two years. Performance in the examination can be used for selection into employment, further and higher education (ibid.).

Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme combines the academic strengths of Leaving Certificate Established with a dynamic focus on self-directed learning, enterprise, work and the community (Department of Education, 2024[1]). It is designed to give a vocational dimension to the Leaving Certificate and prepare young people for adult life with an ability to cope and thrive in an environment of rapid change. The programme is also completed by a standardised assessment (ibid.).

Leaving Certificate Applied is a two-year programme available to students who wish to follow a practical or vocationally oriented path (Department of Education, 2024[1]). It comprises a range of courses structured around three elements: vocational preparation, vocational education and general education. LCA focuses on learners at risk of early leaving from education and training. To this end, it emphasises cross-curricular work, tasks and projects, and personal and social development. Furthermore, a minimum level of attendance is required in LCA (ibid.).

Following a comprehensive review of Senior Cycle carried out from 2016, the Minister of Education announced a programme of work for a reimagined Senior Cycle in March 2022, with further refinements announced in September 2023 (Department of Education, 2022[45]; Department of Education, 2023[46]). This will involve significant changes to assessment at Senior Cycle. The programme of work builds on a review of Senior Cycle programmes and vocational pathways completed by the NCCA between 2016 and 2020 (NCCA, 2022[47]). This review involved a range of research, consultations and communications with stakeholders on all aspects of review and redevelopment over several phases. The NCCA also commissioned external expertise to support the process, including the Economic and Social Research Institute and the OECD (NCCA, 2022[47]; OECD, 2020[48]). These findings will inform the current review of Senior Cycle, which aims to shape the curriculum to meet the learners' needs and their future (NCCA, 2024[49]).

In regard to single-sex post-primary schools, out of 727 schools in 2022/23, there were 126 all-girls (26 DEIS) and 106 all-boys schools (18 DEIS) (Department of Education, 2023[50]). This means that almost a third (31.9%) of post-primary schools in Ireland are single-sex. As in primary education, the DoE encourages local consultation on changing a school's status to co-education, and new schools are typically mixed-gender (see section Primary education). Over the past decades, the overall percentage of students in co-educational post-primary (voluntary) schools has increased from 10.8% in 1962/3 to 68.3% in 2022/23 (McCoy, Carroll and Ye, 2024[51]).

Special education

Special needs education refers to educational arrangements put in place for children with disabilities, although not all children with disabilities have special educational needs (NCSE, 2014[52]). A person is considered to have special educational needs if their capacity to participate in and benefit from education is restricted due to an enduring physical, sensory, mental health or learning disability (ibid.). Special education is provided at all levels, from ECEC to post-primary education.

In ECEC, it is provided in early intervention classes for children diagnosed with autism from the age of three (Department of Education, 2024[1]). These are staffed by a teacher and two special needs assistants with a maximum of six children (ibid.). A significant proportion of children with disabilities in ECEC settings are in mainstream ECEC services supported through the AIM and the ECCE programme (see section Early childhood education and care). In 2023/24, there were 106 108 children taking part in the ECCE programme (Department of Education, 2024[1]). Of these, 7 116 have been approved for additional financial support under the AIM (ibid.). In addition to the 7 116, other children in the ECCE programme benefit from other targeted and universal supports under AIM, including targeted advice and guidance from early years specialists (ibid.).

At primary and post-primary levels, special education may occur in mainstream classes, special classes within mainstream schools and dedicated special schools. In 2022/23, there were 116 special schools with 8 424 students providing for particular types of disability and special educational needs, including those catering to students with general learning disabilities, visual or hearing impairments, physical disabilities, and emotional or severe behavioural difficulties (Department of Education and Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, 2024[41]). The number of students in special education has increased in all types of settings (Figure 1.7). Between 2018/19 and 2022/23, the number of students in special schools increased by 9.1%, in special classes in primary schools by 62.5% and in special classes in post-primary schools by 88.6%. Special classes offer targeted support with low student/teacher ratios for learners with diverse needs.

Figure 1.7. Number of students in special education settings
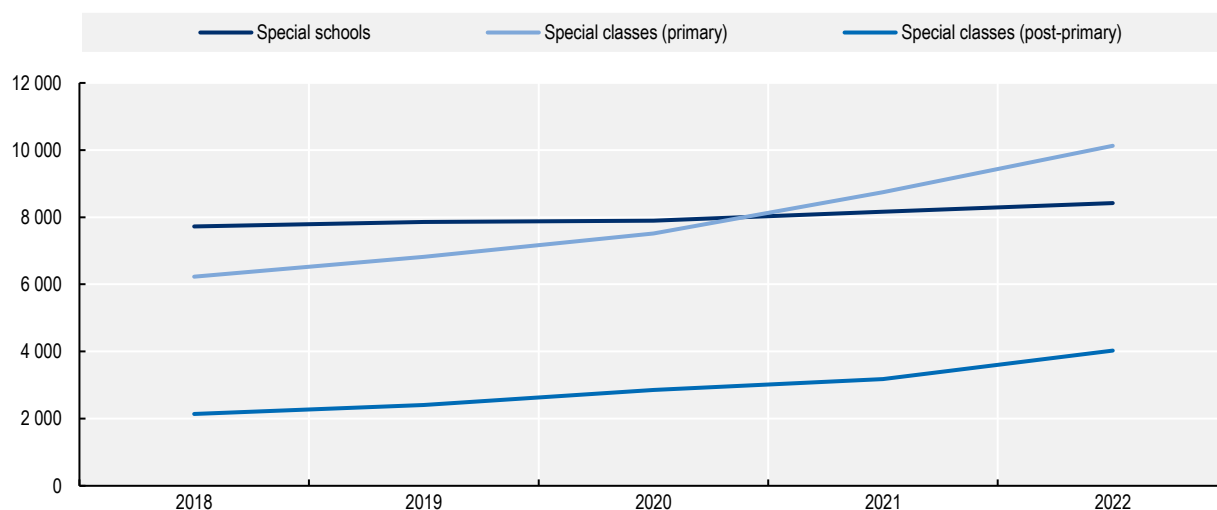
Source: Department of Education and Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (2024[41]), Education Indicators for Ireland: March 2024, https://www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/289186/f6c5f4cd-913e-40c2-9cc0-c48c6d566e14.pdf#page=nullhttps://www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/289186/f6c5f4cd-913e-40c2-9cc0-c48c6d566e14.pdf#page=null (accessed on 4 April 2024).

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In 2022/23, 36.7% and 25.1% of DEIS and non-DEIS primary schools, respectively, had special student enrolment (Department of Education, 2024[1]). Special needs education was supported by 13 985 special education teachers in primary and post-primary schools, 1 529 teachers in special schools and 19 219 special needs assistants across the three school settings in 2022/23 (Department of Education and Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, 2024[41]). While the exact

numbers on students supported by special education teachers and special needs assistants in mainstream classes are not available, the majority of students with special educational needs are in mainstream classes and, therefore, in DEIS schools (Department of Education, 2024[1]).

Alternative educational provision

While most children in Ireland attend state-funded schools, some are educated at home or in non-recognised schools (independent (private) schools). These are generally not funded by the DoE, overseen by its Inspectorate, and are not subject to requirements such as curriculum, calendar year and other policies specific to the DoE (Tusla, n.d.[53]). While non-recognised schools do not need to follow the national curriculum, each child must receive a particular minimum education set by the DoE (Department of Education and Science, 2003[54]). Independent school providers also set their own criteria for the employment of staff in regard to qualifications and experience (Tusla, n.d.[53]). Teachers at independent schools may hold a teaching and other qualification, but there is no requirement for those responsible for the education of a child in a setting outside of a recognised school to have any specific qualifications (ibid.). However, it is a legal requirement that all staff employed or working on a voluntary basis at an independent school are Garda vetted. All staff and volunteers must be trained in the Children First National Guidelines (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2017[55]) and in the school's Child Safeguarding Statement (Tusla, n.d.[56]).

Furthermore, Tusla is responsible for maintaining a register of all home-educated children who attend a school or setting not recognised by the DoE. Tusla has also established an Alternative Education Assessment and Registration Service (Tusla, n.d.[57]). This service oversees the regulation of education provision in places other than recognised schools, and its function is to assess educational provision for children who are not attending a recognised school (ibid.). All parents or guardians who want to educate their children at home or in a school not recognised by the DoE must register their child with Tusla (Government of Ireland, 2000[58]). Tusla will then arrange for the educational provision to be assessed to ensure it meets a certain minimum standard (Tusla, n.d.[57]).

Alternative educational provisions have a relatively low overall enrolment, but their share has increased since 2014 (Figure 1.8). Home Education learners almost doubled from 969 in 2014 to 1 931 in 2022, and those enrolled in independent schools rose by over a third from 4 581 in 2014 to 6 217 in 2022.

Figure 1.8. Learners in Home Education and independent schools
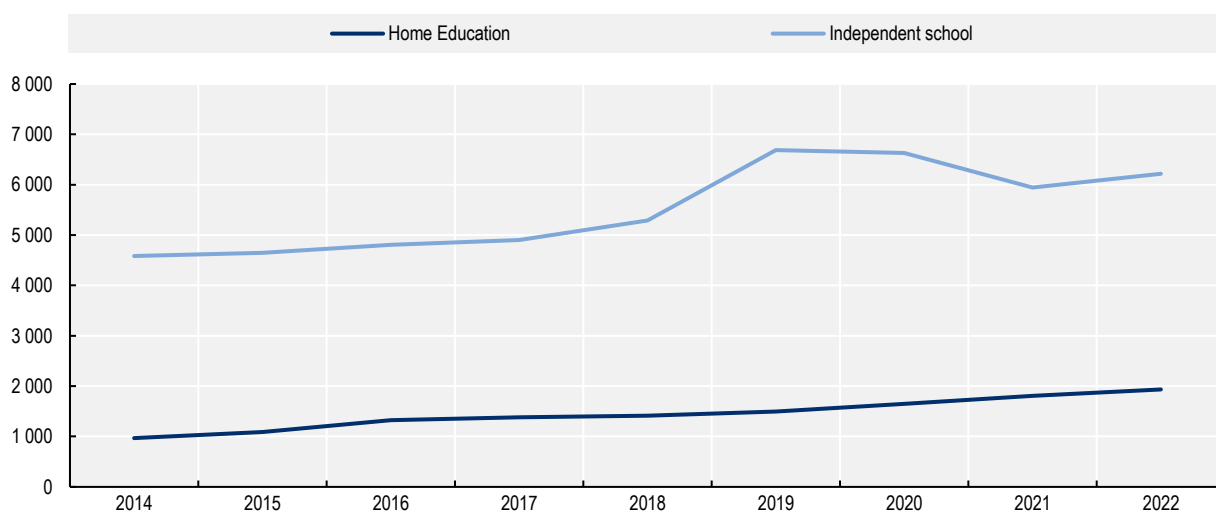
Source: Department of Education (2024[1]), OECD Review of resourcing schools to address educational disadvantage: Country Background Report Ireland, https://s3-eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/govieassets/296017/4d1ac422-5475-470e-b910-4c80a83c43bc.pdf.

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Provision for learners disengaged from education

The Irish education system also offers out-of-school alternative services to individuals who have difficulties staying engaged in education (Department of Education, 2024[1]). These settings vary in structure and design, but provide an essential service for a small cohort of students who have had difficulty continuing their education. This sector has expanded over time, often responding to local or specific needs. Settings have been established in Dublin, Limerick, Cork and other main urban areas. Out-of-school education settings also include the alternative learning programmes developed by Education and Training Boards, Cork Life Centre, Carline and City Motor Sports centres in Dublin, among others (ibid.).

Another support mechanism in this area is Youthreach, an education, training and work programme for early leavers from education and training aged 15 to 20 years who might not have completed Junior Cycle (Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, 2022[59]). It supports young people by helping them identify their future educational and career paths, and allows them to gain qualifications such as Junior Cycle, LCA, and Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) awards. Youthreach operates on a full-time basis and generally lasts one to two years. It integrates personal development, literacy, numeracy, information and communication technologies, and a range of vocational options and work experiences (ibid.). It is also supported by the European Social Fund (European Commission, 2023[60]). Other supports for individuals at risk of early leaving from education and training (e.g. HSCL Scheme and School Completion Programme) are described in Chapter 5.

DEIS programme

The DEIS programme, commenced in 2005 by the DoE, represents a key policy initiative to address concentrated educational disadvantage across the primary and post-primary levels (Department of Education and Science, 2005[61]). Recognising the profound consequences of underachievement as a result of educational disadvantage in schools, the DEIS programme seeks to provide targeted support to schools with concentrated populations of students from socio-economically disadvantaged communities

(ibid.). Since 2005, the programme has undergone several significant changes, outlined in Table 1.2 and further elaborated in the following sections. In 2017, following a review, the DEIS identification model was refined towards more comprehensive and robust measures of socio-economic disadvantage (Department of Education, 2017[26]). An action plan was also set up to monitor the progress of the DEIS programme (ibid.). In 2021-22, the identification model underwent further changes, reflecting a more nuanced understanding of the identification of socio-economic disadvantage (Department of Education, 2022[62]).

Table 1.2. Evolution of the DEIS programme (2005-2021)

	Pre-DEIS	DEIS 2005-2017	DEIS 2017-2021	Post-2021
Scale and integration of schemes targeting socio-economic disadvantage	Support measures to target socio-economic disadvantage are not integrated.	Support measures are integrated under "one roof", i.e. the DEIS programme, and resources are extended: smaller class sizes in all DEIS Urban Band 1 schools, HSCL Scheme extended to all schools, DEIS grant allocated to all schools. In 2011, DEIS Rural schools lose access to HSCL Coordinators with the introduction of the National Recovery Plan 2011-2014.	Integrated measures are broadened by dedicated career guidance counsellors, Mandatory Book Rental Scheme, prioritisation of National Education Psychological Service and others. In 2017, extended to 79 additional schools.	Class size in DEIS Urban Band 1 reduced alongside mainstream class size reductions. School Completion Programme budget enhanced by 10%. Extended to 322 additional schools.
Identification of socio-economic disadvantage	No standardised measure across programmes.	Primary schools are identified based on a survey of school principals who provide data on student characteristics. Post-primary schools are identified based on centralised student background information.	Primary and post-primary schools are identified based on the same centralised student background information (HP Index).	Primary and post-primary schools are identified based on the same centralised student background information (HP Index) with more nuanced weights. Additional measures considered: Traveller and Roma students, students residing in emergency accommodation, and those experiencing homelessness.
Categorisation of disadvantage in schools	No centralised categorisation.	Primary: DEIS Urban Band 1, DEIS Urban Band 2 and DEIS Rural. Post-primary: no categorisation.	Primary: DEIS Urban Band 1, DEIS Urban Band 2 and DEIS Rural. Post-primary: no categorisation.	Primary: DEIS Urban Band 1, DEIS Urban Band 2 and DEIS Rural. Post-primary: no categorisation.

Note: The table illustrates only selected significant changes and does not provide a comprehensive list. HSCL = Home School Community Liaison (see Chapter 5 for more information).
Source: Archer and Sofroniou (2008[63]), The Assessment of Levels of Disadvantage in Primary Schools for DEIS, https://www.erc.ie/documents/deis_assess_disadv_prim_sch.pdf (accessed on 19 April 2024); Department of Education (2017[26]), DEIS Plan 2017, https://www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/24451/ba1553e873864a559266d344b4c78660.pdf#page=null (accessed on 30 November 2023), Department of Education (2022[62]), The Refined DEIS identification model, https://assets.gov.ie/220043/d6b98002-a904-427f-b48a-0fa0af756ea7.pdf (accessed on 30 November 2023), Department of Education and Science (2005[61]), DEIS: An Action Plan for Educational Inclusion, https://www.into.ie/app/uploads/2019/07/deis_action_plan_on_educational_inclusion.pdf (accessed on 30 November 2023); and Weir (2006[64]), A Report on the Procedures Used to Identify Post-Primary Schools for Inclusion in the School Support Programme under DEIS, https://www.erc.ie/documents/procedures_for_selecting_post-primary_schools_for_deis.pdf (accessed on 12 May 2024).

Conception of the DEIS programme in 2005

The DEIS programme was conceived to assist children and young people achieve their full potential within the Irish education system, fostering better participation in society and the economy (Department of Education and Science, 2005[61]). Acknowledging the absence of a standardised system for identifying levels of socio-economic disadvantage in schools, DEIS aimed to refine methods for identifying schools with students from disadvantaged backgrounds and targeted additional support through various measures. The definition of educational disadvantage is framed in the Education Act (1998) as (Government of Ireland, 1998[65]):

> *"The impediments to education arising from social or economic disadvantage which prevent students from deriving appropriate benefit from education in schools."*

The identification of schools for inclusion is based on the "multiplier effect" of concentrated levels of socio-economic disadvantage, acknowledging that high levels of disadvantage require targeted, multi-dimensional and more intensive responses. The multiplier effect implies that students in schools with high shares of disadvantaged students can have poorer academic outcomes, even taking account of individual social backgrounds (Smyth, McCoy and Kingston, 2015[66]). The programme was first grounded on the following principles (Department of Education and Science, 2005[61]):

- That every child and young person deserves an equal chance to access, participate in and benefit from education;

- Every person should have the opportunity to reach their full educational potential for personal, social and economic reasons; and

- Education is a critical factor in promoting social inclusion and economic development.

Furthermore, the DEIS programme sought to improve the targeting of additional support to schools with high levels of disadvantage (Department of Education and Skills, n.d.[67]). To this end, several existing schemes and programmes were integrated into School Support Programme. These encompassed Early Start, Giving Children an Even Break, the HSCL Scheme, the School Completion Programme, the Early Literacy Initiative, and the School Books Grant Scheme at primary and post-primary levels. Additionally, DEIS included provisions for vulnerable groups, particularly Traveller and Roma students, and those for whom English or Irish was not their first language (ibid.).

The DEIS programme also recognised the lack of a standardised system for identifying levels of socio-economic disadvantage in schools. As mentioned above, the DEIS programme emphasises the significance of focusing support on concentrated numbers of students from areas of significant disadvantage. Therefore, in the initial stages of DEIS, primary schools were identified based on a survey of school principals who provided data on specific characteristics of students: unemployed parents, living in local authority accommodation, from lone parent families, of Traveller ethnicity, from large families (more than five children), and eligible for free books (Archer and Sofroniou, 2008[63]; Department of Education, 2022[62]). At the post-primary level, centralised information was used to identify schools for inclusion: the percentage of students with medical cards, school-level retention rates for several cohorts, and Junior Certificate[3] achievement data over a period of time (Weir, 2006[64]). Based on these characteristics, 670 primary and 203 post-primary schools were identified as DEIS, representing approximately 20% of all schools (Department of Education and Skills, n.d.[67]).

Review of the DEIS programme

In 2015, the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) evaluated the DEIS programme, yielding several policy implications (Smyth, McCoy and Kingston, 2015[66]). These emphasised the continuing concentration of disadvantage in DEIS schools and the need for sustained support. It suggested a nuanced approach to resourcing, moving away from a rigid "cut-off" to a degree of tapering, while acknowledging the complexity of needs in DEIS schools. Additionally, challenges in mathematics highlighted the necessity to focus on numeracy skills in future provisions. The report also highlighted that the lack of data on the social profile of individual students posed challenges in measuring the achievement gap for disadvantaged students and capturing the additional impact of the concentration of disadvantage in a school on achievement (ibid.).

A review of the DEIS programme was initiated following the ESRI publication. The objective was to develop a new methodology for school identification and a renewed support framework to address educational disadvantage effectively (Department of Education, 2024[1]). The outcome of the review, documented in the Report on the Review of DEIS, led to the publication of the DEIS Plan 2017 (Department of Education,

2017[26]; Department of Education and Skills, n.d.[67]). It set goals to break down barriers and disrupt the cycle of inter-generational disadvantage (Department of Education, 2017[26]). The Plan also aimed to equip students to participate, succeed and contribute effectively to society in a changing world (ibid.). To measure progress, it outlined specific targets related to literacy, numeracy, retention, teacher education and parental and community engagement (ibid.). The Plan also articulated five key goals (ibid.):

- Implementation of a more robust and responsive assessment framework for school identification and effective resource allocation;
- Improvement of learning experiences and outcomes for students in DEIS schools;
- Enhancement of the capacity of school principals and teachers to engage, plan and deploy resources effectively;
- Supporting and fostering best practices through inter-agency collaboration; and
- Provision of research, information, evaluation and feedback to support the work of schools.

More than 100 actions were implemented to support achieving these goals and provide students most at risk of disadvantage with improved outcomes (Department of Education, 2017[26]). Principals and teachers received priority access to *Forbairt*, a developmental programme for school leadership teams (Department of Education, 2024[1]). Aspiring principals from DEIS schools also received priority access for the Post Graduate Diploma in School Leadership (ibid.).

Additionally, all post-primary schools participating in the DEIS programme benefited from dedicated career guidance counsellors (Department of Education, 2017[26]). Furthermore, strengthening the connections between ECEC settings and primary schools aimed to create a more seamless educational transition. Piloted approaches aimed to identify effective interventions and encourage creativity in teaching and learning, supported by the School Excellence Fund. The mandatory implementation of Book Rental Scheme for schools in the programme, greater prioritisation of National Education Psychological Service for DEIS schools, formal outreach arrangements by education training boards (see Chapter 2 for more details), and the incorporation of insights from the Area Based Childhood programmes into school supports collectively formed a comprehensive strategy to enhance educational outcomes and address deep-rooted disadvantage. Moreover, DEIS schools were expected to engage in a systematic three-year planning and monitoring process (ibid.).

Changes in school identification

A key aspect of the DEIS Plan 2017 was introducing a new approach to identifying schools eligible for additional support. The consultation process revealed that schools were averse towards the survey-based approach due to the additional administrative burden it imposed (Department of Education, 2024[1]). It was considered unfair to expect schools to gather sensitive socio-economic data on their school communities (ibid.). There was a demand for a more responsive methodology that could adapt to demographic and other changes in school communities, a crucial consideration given the significance of the social context in the DEIS programme. Responding to these concerns, the DoE explored alternative options, deploying the Pobal Haase Pratschke Index (HP Index) (Box 1.1). Data in the HP Index are derived from the Central Statistics Office National Census. Students receive an HP Index score based on their home address. The initial application of the HP Index focused on assessing the percentage of students with a score of -10 or below (Department of Education, 2024[1]). This threshold, designated by Pobal as one standard deviation below the mean, is the point at which the label "disadvantaged" is applied (Haase and Pratschke, 2017[68]). The result of these efforts was the inclusion of an additional 79 schools in the DEIS programme from September 2017 (Department of Education, 2024[1]).

Box 1.1. Pobal Haase Pratschke Index (HP Index)

The HP Index is a comprehensive measure of relative affluence and deprivation across urban and rural areas. The index aims to address some limitations of other deprivation indices, such as the lack of sensitivity to rural disadvantage, or for being less meaningful for some age groups or minority groups (Fecht et al., 2017[69]; Fu, Exeter and Anderson, 2015[70]). It is based on three dimensions of affluence/disadvantage: demographic profile, social class composition and labour market situation.

The **demographic profile** emphasises the distinct challenges faced by rural areas, where adverse labour market conditions often manifest as agricultural underemployment or emigration. This selective emigration, particularly among core working-age cohorts and those with post-secondary education, leaves behind economically dependent communities with lower educational attainment, contributing to an erosion of the local labour force, decreased attractiveness for investment, and a decline in services. The demographic profile component of the HP Index comprises six indicators: the change in population over five years, population aged under 15 or over 64 years of age, population with primary educational attainment only, population with tertiary educational attainment, households with children aged under 15 years and headed by a single parent, and the mean number of persons per room.

Additionally, the HP Index encompasses **social class composition**, acknowledging the pervasive influence of social class on various life domains in urban and rural settings. An advantaged social class profile is linked to positive education, health, housing and economic status outcomes. In contrast, areas with weaker profiles face higher unemployment rates and increased vulnerability to economic restructuring. Social class composition is measured by five indicators: population with primary educational attainment, population with tertiary educational attainment, households headed by professionals or managerial and technical employees including farmers with 100 acres or more, households headed by semi-skilled or unskilled manual workers including farmers with fewer than 30 acres, and the mean number of persons per room.

Finally, the HP Index includes the **labour market situation**, primarily applicable to urban settings, highlighting the impact of unemployment on multiple forms of disadvantage. In addition to the economic hardship that results from the lack of paid employment, young people living in areas with exceptionally high unemployment rates might lack positive role models. Labour market situation is measured by three indicators: households with children aged under 15 years and headed by a single parent, male unemployment rate, and female unemployment rate.

The HP Index offers both absolute and relative scores. Absolute scores are used to measure deprivation over time relative to 2006. For instance, following a long-term economic crisis, levels of deprivation are expected to increase. Relative scores assess deprivation across regions called Small Areas (SAs). Before 2011, SAs were based on electoral divisions. However, these varied significantly in size, from under 100 to over 32 000 inhabitants. Nowadays, SAs maintain homogeneity in social composition and have a standardised population size, with a minimum of 50 households and averaging just under 100 households. As of 2022, there were 18 919 SAs in Ireland (CSO, 2023[71]). Some census results are published at the SA level and values for the HP Index are also available at street level in Ireland (CSO, n.d.[72]; Pobal, n.d.[73]).

Source: Haase and Pratschke (2017[68]), The 2016 Pobal HP Deprivation Index for Small Areas (SA), https://www.pobal.ie/app/uploads/2018/06/The-2016-Pobal-HP-Deprivation-Index-Introduction-07.pdf (accessed on 30 November 2023).

Refinements of identification model for the inclusion of schools in the DEIS programme in 2022

After further consultation with stakeholders and refinements of the DEIS identification model, 322 schools were added to the DEIS programme in 2022. In total, 966 primary and 235 post-primary schools were included in the DEIS programme in 2022/23, and 153 712 primary and 103 657 post-primary students were in DEIS schools. This means that almost a third of schools (29.9% in primary and 32.3% in post-primary) and around a quarter of students (28.0% in primary and 25.5% in post-primary) are part of the DEIS programme (Figure 1.9).

Figure 1.9. Shares of DEIS schools and students in DEIS schools (2014-2022)
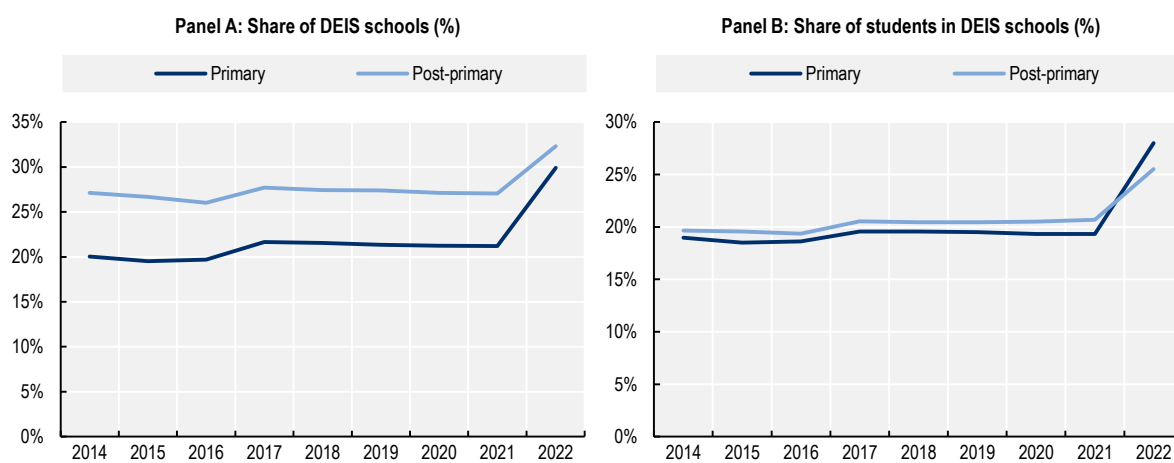
Source: Adapted from Department of Education (2024[1]), OECD Review of resourcing schools to address educational disadvantage: Country Background Report Ireland, https://s3-eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/govieassets/296017/4d1ac422-5475-470e-b910-4c80a83c43bc.pdf.

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Further refinements to the model to identify the schools for inclusion were undertaken and led to an expansion of the number of DEIS schools. The new model addresses the shortcomings of the previous version by introducing nuanced criteria. Notably, the model now also accounts for students from areas designated as borderline disadvantaged (Department of Education, 2022[62]). This improves the single cut-off point of the 2017 version and allows for the disadvantage of schools with high proportions of students from borderline disadvantaged areas to be reflected. Students from regions with an HP Index score of -7.5 and below are grouped based on their level of disadvantage and assigned a weighting to reflect the severity of their relative disadvantage (ibid.):

- Weight 2: those with an HP Index score of -20 or below ("very disadvantaged");
- Weight 1: those with an HP Index score between -10 and -20 ("disadvantaged"); and
- Weight 0.5: those between -7.5 and -10 ("borderline disadvantaged").

This allows for the relative severity of disadvantage within an individual school to be reflected in the overall model. Weights are automatically assigned to all students in all schools. The refined identification model considered additional components to reflect the educational disadvantage experienced by specific student groups. Self-identified Traveller and Roma students were factored into the model, acknowledging their unique challenges (Department of Education, 2022[62]). Similarly, students residing in International Protection Accommodation Services (IPAS) centres, Emergency Orientation and Reception Centres

(EROC), and those experiencing homelessness were included, utilising available data on state-funded homeless accommodation. These three groups are assigned a disadvantaged weight grouping (ibid.).

The weights of all students are then summed for each school and divided by the total school population, yielding a school-weighted score (Department of Education, 2022[62]). These scores are then standardised relative to their primary and post-primary score distributions, and schools with scores above a threshold set by the DoE (not publicly available) are considered DEIS (alternative A in Figure 1.10). Additionally, to maintain consistency with the previous iteration of the model, the DoE measured the proportion of students with an HP Index score at or below -10 in each school, and schools with proportions of students above a threshold are automatically considered DEIS regardless of their standardised scores (alternative B in Figure 1.10).

Figure 1.10. Illustration of the DEIS school identification process

Alternative A: DEIS school identification based on standardised scores
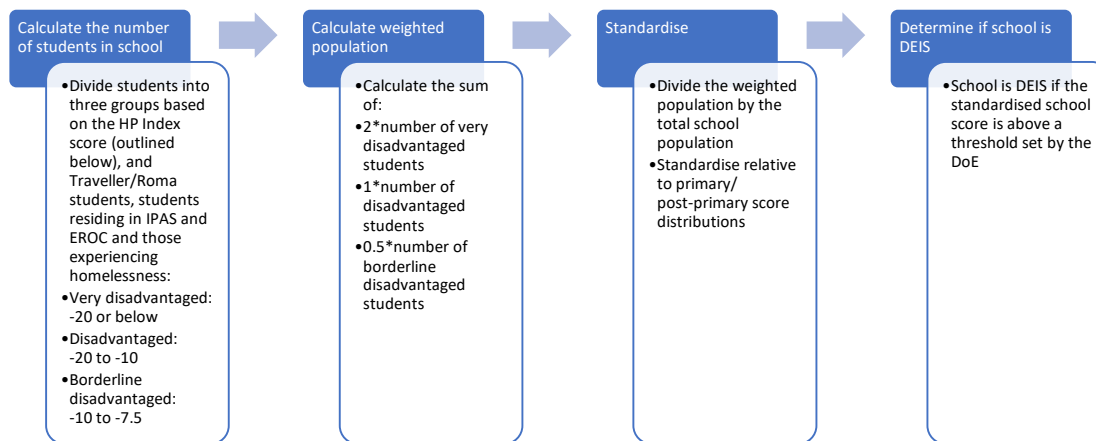
Alternative B: DEIS school identification based on the share of students with HP Index scores below -10
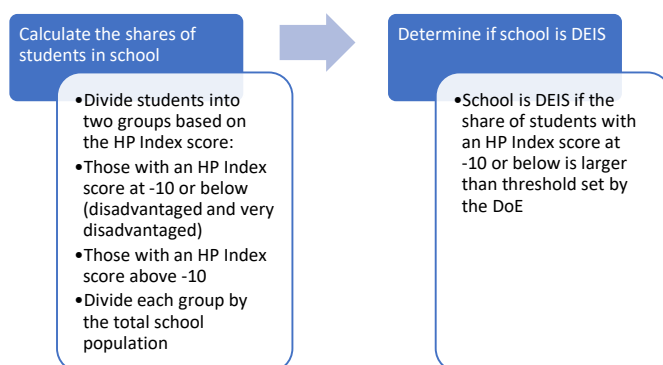
Source: Department of Education (2022[62]), The Refined DEIS identification model, https://assets.gov.ie/220043/d6b98002-a904-427f-b48a-0fa0af756ea7.pdf (accessed on 30 November 2023).

In the final step, primary schools are divided into DEIS Urban Band 1, DEIS Urban Band 2 and DEIS Rural. DEIS Urban Band 1 schools address relatively higher levels of disadvantage than DEIS Urban Band 2 schools. Designation to DEIS Urban Band 1 is based on whether a school is located in an urban area and publicly unavailable thresholds in the above measures. As a result, these schools are allocated more

teachers per student to implement smaller classes. DEIS Urban Band 1 schools are recommended to implement class sizes of 17:1 in junior schools, 19:1 in vertical schools and 21:1 in senior schools (Department of Education, 2023[74])[4]. Otherwise, on average, primary schools are allocated one classroom teacher for every 23 students (ibid.). Other differences between the bands relate to the allocation of administrative and deputy principals (Table 1.3). Post-primary schools in the programme are not categorised. Besides smaller classes, supports vary across these measures (Table 1.3). Most notably, HSCL Coordinators are unavailable to DEIS Rural primary schools.

Table 1.3. DEIS supports

	DEIS Urban Band 1 primary	DEIS Urban Band 2 primary	DEIS Rural primary	DEIS Post-primary
Smaller class size	X			
Administrative/deputy principal (AP/DP)	X (AP on an enrolment of 113 students; DP on an enrolment of 500 students)	X (AP on an enrolment of 136 students)		X (additional DP allocated at lower enrolment threshold (600 students))
DEIS grant allocation	X	X	X	X
HSCL Scheme	X	X		X
School Meals Programme	X	X	X	X
School Completion Programme	X	X		X
Literacy/numeracy supports	X	X		
Action planning supports	X	X	X	X
Continuing professional learning supports	X	X	X	X
Priority access to NEPS	X	X	X	X
Leaving Certificate Applied	N/A	N/A	N/A	X
School Books Grant Scheme	N/A	N/A	N/A	X (Senior Cycle, otherwise parents do not pay for school books)

Note: The table aims to provide an overview of some of the main supports, not an exhaustive nuanced list. HSCL = Home School Community Liaison (see Chapter 5 for more information). Administrative principals are exempt from teaching duties. The enrolment threshold for appointing a deputy principal (DP) exempt from teaching duties is set at 573 students for other than DEIS Urban Band 1 schools. Chapters 2-5 provide additional details about these supports.
Source: Department of Education (2023[75]), DEIS Delivering Equality of Opportunity In Schools, https://www.gov.ie/en/policy-information/4018ea-deis-delivering-equality-of-opportunity-in-schools/ (accessed on 1 December 2023).

The programme was evaluated at various points during the DEIS lifespan. While the evaluations cannot provide causal inference (Chapter 6), they, broadly speaking, show that gaps between DEIS and non-DEIS schools are, in many instances, closing. Some studies indicate an improvement over time in literacy and numeracy test scores of students in DEIS primary schools, with greater increases for literacy than for numeracy (Smyth, McCoy and Kingston, 2015[66]). More recent research comparing gaps between DEIS Urban schools and non-DEIS urban schools does not show statistically significant changes between 2014 and 2021 (Nelis and Gilleece, 2023[76]). This result can be interpreted positively given the significant learning losses following the COVID-19 pandemic internationally, particularly affecting disadvantaged students (ibid.). The gap in post-primary schools has also narrowed based on average Junior Certificate grades, although the improvement is not consistent across all subjects (Weir et al., 2014[77]; Weir and Kavanagh, 2018[78]). Several analyses also highlight a substantial social context effect, with variation in the size of this "effect" across the achievement distribution (Flannery, Gilleece and Clavel, 2023[79]). This

indicates that the being a student in a school with a high concentration of socio-economically disadvantaged students has a negative effect on achievement beyond the student's own socio-economic status. Beyond student performance, attendance at primary and post-primary schools has also seen improvements, although the results refer to before the COVID-19 pandemic (Millar, 2017[80]; Smyth, McCoy and Kingston, 2015[66]). The Inspectorate also evaluated and reported on various aspects of the DEIS programme, including the quality of DEIS action planning process in primary and post-primary schools, and the quality of leadership of DEIS action planning (Department of Education, 2022[81]). Further details are provided in Chapter 6.

Performance of the education system

Ireland has a strong performance in reading, mathematics and science internationally. In primary education, Irish students performed well in mathematics and science in the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) 2019[5]. Fourth-class primary students scored highest among participating EU countries (Perkins and Clerkin, 2020[82]). In regard to science, four EU countries (Finland, Latvia, Lithuania and Sweden) scored significantly higher, eight countries had similar scores and nine countries performed significantly lower than Ireland (ibid.). There have been no significant changes in scores since 2015. Irish fifth-class students also performed above the selected reference countries (Croatia, Lithuania and Northern Ireland (United Kingdom)) in reading in the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) 2021 (Delaney et al., 2023[83]).

At the post-primary level, Ireland had the highest mathematics score of all participating EU countries in TIMSS 2019 (second-year post-primary students) (Perkins and Clerkin, 2020[82]). In science, two EU countries (Finland and Lithuania) significantly outperformed Ireland, three countries (Hungary, Portugal and Sweden) achieved similar scores, and four countries (Cyprus, France, Italy and Romania) performed significantly lower than Ireland. There has been no significant change in Ireland's mean mathematics and science performance since 2015 (ibid.).

More recently, in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2022, students in Ireland scored higher than the OECD average in mathematics, reading and science (OECD, 2023[84]). In fact, Ireland was among the top-performing education systems in mathematics, with only Canada, Estonia, Japan, Korea and Switzerland scoring significantly higher among OECD countries (ibid.). In reading, Ireland was the top-performing education system in the OECD, at par with Estonia, Japan and Korea. In science, Ireland also scored among the top-performing education systems, with only Canada, Estonia, Finland, Japan and Korea scoring statistically higher (ibid.). Indeed, Ireland consistently outperforms the OECD average and other comparable countries (Figure 1.11). Compared to 2018, average results were down in mathematics, about the same in reading and up in science. Furthermore, in 2022, 19.0% of students scored below the baseline level in mathematics (below Level 2), close to two-thirds the OECD average share of 30.0%. Some 7.2% of students were classed as high performers in mathematics (scoring at Level 5 or above), below the OECD average share of 9.0% (ibid.)

Figure 1.11. Snapshot of performance in PISA (2003-2022)

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Socio-economic differences

A student's home environment significantly influences educational outcomes due to several factors, such as family income affecting the availability of educational resources and the provision of a conducive study space. As a result, the achievement of socio-economically advantaged students is higher than that of their disadvantaged peers. This has been confirmed numerous times at primary and post-primary levels in Ireland based on national and international data using various proxies for socio-economic status (Cullinan, Denny and Flannery, 2019[88]; Delaney et al., 2023[83]; Donohue et al., 2023[89]; Duggan et al., 2023[90]; Flannery, Gilleece and Clavel, 2023[79]; Gilleece and Nelis, 2023[91]; Kavanagh and Weir, 2018[92]; Nelis and Gilleece, 2023[76]; Weir and Kavanagh, 2018[78]). Ireland, of course, is not the only country with an achievement gap related to social and economic disadvantage. Socio-economic status has long and significantly impacted students' performance, and inequalities in performance are regularly found in countries participating in international large-scale assessments. Therefore, a more relevant question might be whether the socio-economic gap is larger or smaller compared to other countries.

At the primary level, the socio-economic gap in reading achievement based on PIRLS 2021 was similar to the average gap internationally (88.5 vs. 86.1 points) (Delaney et al., 2023[83]). Similar conclusions can be made when looking at gaps in mathematics and science in the home resources scale in TIMSS 2019 (Mullis et al., 2020[93]). At the post-primary level, the gaps were smaller in international comparisons. Advantaged students (based on the PISA index of economic, social, and cultural status (ESCS)) scored 73.7 points higher than their disadvantaged peers in mathematics in 2022 (OECD, 2023[84]). This gap was smaller than on average across the OECD (93.5 points). In reading, students in the bottom ESCS quartile, indicating the greatest disadvantage, exhibited a mean reading score 75.6 points lower than their

counterparts in the top quartile. Again, this difference was narrower in Ireland than the OECD average (93.0 points). Similarly, in science, the difference between the lowest and highest quartiles was 78.2 points, considerably narrower than the OECD average (96.2 points) (ibid.).

In PISA, the socio-economic gradient is also used to examine the relationship between students' socio-economic status and performance (OECD, 2023[84]). A stronger association means less fairness (thus, less equity) (ibid.). The strength of the gradient is measured by the proportion of the variation in student performance that is accounted for by differences in student socio-economic status (Figure 1.12). When the relationship between socio-economic status and performance is strong, socio-economic status predicts performance well. On average across OECD countries in 2022, 15.5% of the variation in mathematics performance within each country was associated with socio-economic status. In addition to having above-average mathematics scores, Ireland exhibited above-average socio-economic fairness (13.0% of the variation in mathematics is associated with socio-economic status).

Figure 1.12. Strength of socio-economic gradient and mathematics performance
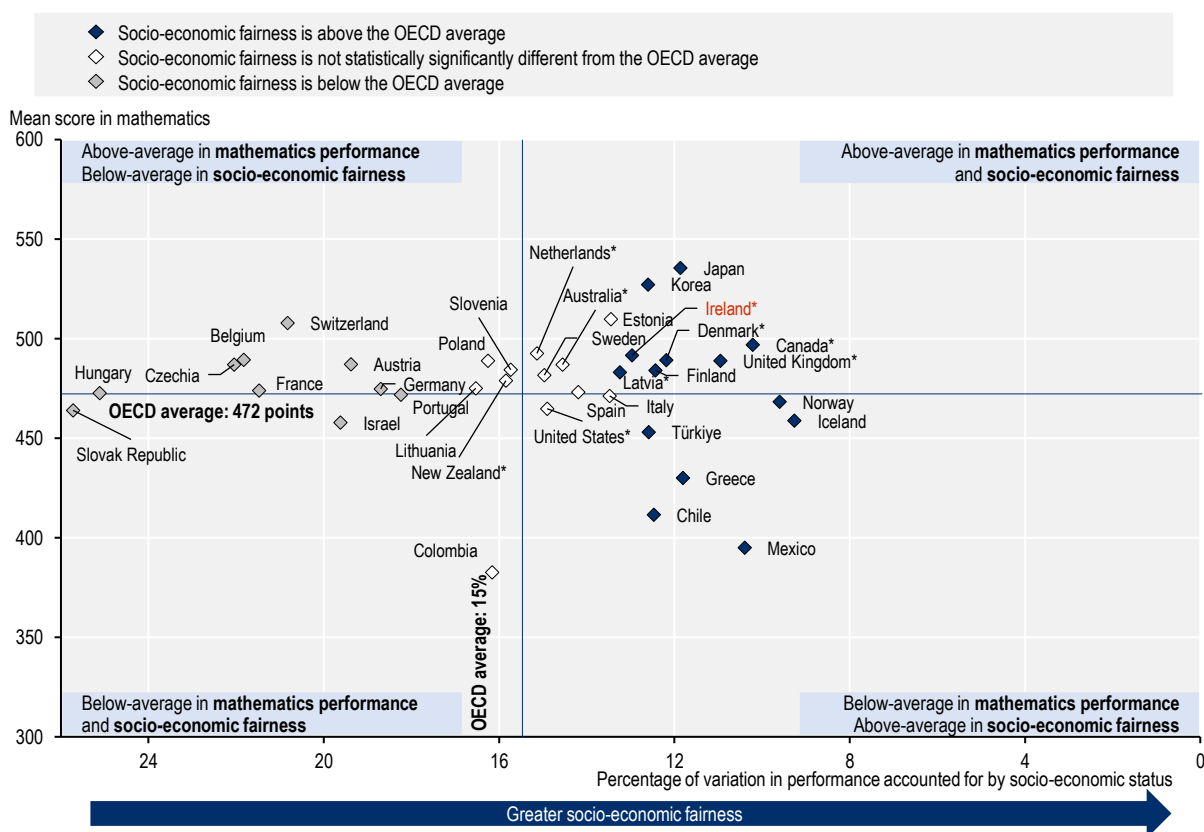
Note: * Caution is required when interpreting estimates because one or more PISA sampling standards were not met (see Reader's Guide, Annexes A2 and A4 in OECD (2023[84])). The PISA index of economic, social and cultural status measures socio-economic status.
Source: OECD (2023[84]), PISA 2022 Results (Volume I): The State of Learning and Equity in Education, Table I.B1.4.3, https://doi.org/10.1787/53f23881-en.

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The HP Index (see Box 1.1) has also been used to compare retention rates at the post-primary level (Department of Education, 2023[94]). The HP Index categorises areas into eight levels of affluence or

disadvantage based on national census data, ranging from extremely affluent to extremely disadvantaged. In the 2016 cohort, most students fell in the middle categories of deprivation. The retention rate for the Leaving Certificate declines from the affluent to the extremely disadvantaged groups. For instance, the affluent group had a 95.6% retention rate, while the extremely disadvantaged group had only a 66.0% retention rate. This pattern was consistent across other educational milestones like Junior Cycle and Transition Year participation (ibid.). The retention rate of Traveller and Roma students is described in the Performance of Traveller and Roma students section.

Differences by DEIS status

As mentioned in the section on the DEIS programme, the key aim of the initiative is to target and support schools with high concentrations of socio-economically disadvantaged students. Given the robust evidence on how socio-economic background is associated with performance, illustrated above, it is not unreasonable to expect to see gaps between DEIS and non-DEIS schools (Gilleece et al., 2020[95]). Such differences must not be interpreted as effects of the DEIS programme. Indeed, more robust evaluations have been undertaken to consider a range of other factors that can impact achievement, and these are summarised in Chapter 6. Nevertheless, simple comparisons between DEIS and non-DEIS schools are also regularly analysed in Ireland.

At the primary level, DEIS gaps can be observed between non-DEIS urban and DEIS Urban Band 1 schools (Nelis and Gilleece, 2023[76]). According to National Assessments in Mathematics and English Reading (NAMER) 2021, a representative survey of second and sixth-class students, second-class students in non-DEIS urban schools demonstrated a significantly higher mean reading score (265.4) compared to their counterparts in DEIS Urban Band 1 schools (236.9) and DEIS Urban Band 2 schools (252.3) (Figure 1.13). The gaps between the scores of students in non-DEIS urban schools and those in DEIS Urban Band 1 schools were approximately twice as large as the differences between students in non-DEIS urban schools and DEIS Urban Band 2 schools. While there were no significant changes in the scores between 2014 and 2021, this result can be interpreted positively given the significant learning losses following the COVID-19 pandemic internationally, particularly affecting disadvantaged students (ibid.).

Figure 1.13. Reading and mathematics scores at the primary level (2014 and 2021)
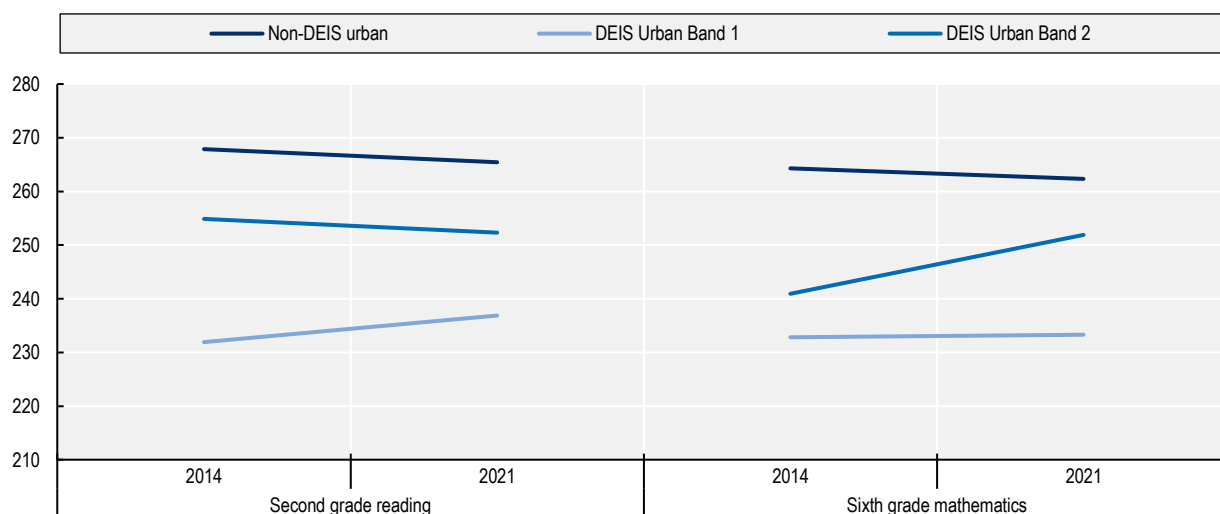
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Moreover, in 2021, 43.2% of second-class students in DEIS Urban Band 1 schools had reading scores at or below Level 1 (Nelis and Gilleece, 2023[76]). This suggests that the target in the DEIS Plan, which set out for the percentage of low achievers (students performing at or below Level 1) to be at 40%, was not met (Department of Education, 2017[26]). Furthermore, 25.0% of second-class students in DEIS Urban Band 1 schools had reading scores at or above Level 3 (high achievers) (Nelis and Gilleece, 2023[76]). The corresponding target for high achievers in DEIS Urban Band 1 schools in the DEIS Plan was 25.0%, suggesting that this target was met (Department of Education, 2017[26]; Nelis and Gilleece, 2023[76]).

Sixth-class primary students' performance in mathematics based on NAMER 2021 followed a similar pattern. Students in non-DEIS urban schools had a significantly higher score (262.3) than their counterparts in DEIS Urban Band 1 schools (233.3) and a higher score (albeit not significantly) than their counterparts in DEIS Urban Band 2 schools (251.9) (Figure 1.13 above) (Nelis and Gilleece, 2023[76]). The change between 2014 and 2021 was statistically insignificant (ibid.). While the gap in average mathematics achievement between non-DEIS urban and DEIS Urban Band 1 schools was very similar in 2021 and 2014 (about 30 points in both cycles), the gap between non-DEIS urban and DEIS Urban Band 2 schools narrowed from a 23.4-point gap to a 10.4-point gap. The change was not statistically significant (ibid.).

Moreover, 48.6% of sixth-class students in DEIS Urban Band 1 schools had mathematics scores at or below Level 1 (low achievers) (Nelis and Gilleece, 2023[76]). This suggests that the target set out in the DEIS Plan, which aimed to reduce the percentage of low achievers in mathematics to 42%, was not met (Department of Education, 2017[26]; Nelis and Gilleece, 2023[76]). Moreover, 22.4% of students in DEIS Urban Band 1 schools had scores at or above Level 3 – a value below the target of 27% (ibid.).

Similar comparisons can be made using international large-scale assessments. In PIRLS 2021, similar to the NAMER results discussed above, students in DEIS Urban Band 1 achieved lower scores than their peers in non-DEIS schools (Delaney et al., 2023[83]). Students in DEIS Urban Band 2 also scored lower than their peers in non-DEIS schools. PIRLS also reports on DEIS Rural schools, whose results did not differ significantly from any of the other three groups (ibid.). In TIMSS, non-DEIS primary schools outperformed DEIS schools in mathematics and science in 2011, 2015 and 2019 (Duggan et al., 2023[90]).

In post-primary education, approximately one-fifth (21.0%) of PISA 2022 students attended DEIS Post-primary schools (Donohue et al., 2023[89]). They achieved a significantly lower score in mathematics than their peers in non-DEIS schools by 35.6 points (ibid.). Similar results hold for reading, where the gap stood at 37.3 points, and science, with a 39.7 points difference. Students in DEIS schools achieved significantly higher reading results than the OECD average and non-significantly lower results in mathematics and science (ibid.).

While comparisons with previous PISA cycles are challenging, the broad results that non-DEIS schools outperform DEIS schools have been observed for a long time (Gilleece et al., 2020[95]). However, until 2018, students in both DEIS and non-DEIS schools also saw a substantial improvement in reading scores, with a respective increase of 39.2 and 19.6 points between 2009 and 2018 (ibid.)[6]. As such, there is some evidence of a narrowing of the achievement gap in reading between students in DEIS and non-DEIS post-primary schools over time. While in 2009, the difference in mean reading scores between DEIS and non-DEIS schools was about 70 points, the gap was about 50 points in 2015 and 2018 (ibid.). The DEIS achievement gap in mathematics decreased between 2012 and 2018 (from 60 to 44 points), although the difference was not statistically significant (ibid.). There were no significant changes in science performance for students in DEIS and non-DEIS schools between cycles until 2018 (ibid.).

Narrowing of the achievement gap between DEIS and non-DEIS post-primary schools has also been observed in administrative records. Based on the Junior Certificate Examinations (JCE) overall performance scale (OPS), the mean OPS score in DEIS schools stood at 10.5 points lower than that in non-DEIS schools in 2002 (Weir and Kavanagh, 2018[78]). In 2016, the gap was 8.4 points. The average annual rate of increase in non-DEIS schools from 2002 to 2016 was 0.19 OPS points, significantly lower than in DEIS schools (0.33 points per year), representing a narrowing of the gap in JCE achievement between DEIS and non-DEIS schools (ibid.).

In administrative data, possession of a medical card has sometimes been used as a proxy for socio-economic status[7]. This indicator has also been interacted with the DEIS status and to observe differences in OPS over time (Weir and Kavanagh, 2018[78]). Gaps between medical card holders and others are visible in 2007 and 2016 in both DEIS and non-DEIS post-primary schools (Table 1.4). The differences are larger in non-DEIS schools in both years. From 2007 to 2016, the largest increases in average OPS scores were among medical card-holding students in DEIS schools. The smallest increase in mean OPS scores was among non-medical card-holding students in non-DEIS schools (ibid.).

Table 1.4. Mean overall performance scores by DEIS status and medical card holders (2007 and 2016)

	2007			2016		
	From a medical card-holding family	Without medical card	Difference	From a medical card-holding family	Without medical card	Difference
Non-DEIS	61.8	70.1	8.3	66.2	72.4	6.2
DEIS	55.6	62.5	6.9	60.6	65.8	5.2

Note: Overall performance score involves the allocation of numerical values to the alphabetical grades (A-F) awarded to Junior Certificate Examinations candidates in individual subjects (Kellaghan and Dwan, 1995[96]). Summing these values produce an index of a candidate's general scholastic achievement. It is based on a students' performance in the seven subjects in which they performed the best. The maximum possible score is 84 (which is achieved by a student who is awarded seven A grades), while the lowest possible score is 0 (where a student does not achieve at least a grade F on any of their best seven papers). Medical card holders can get certain health services free of charge. Additionally, they receive an examination fee waiver (Weir and Kavanagh, 2018[78]). To qualify for a medical card, the income must be below a specific figure for the family size (Citizens Information, 2023[97]).
Source: Weir and Kavanagh (2018[78]), The evaluation of DEIS at post-primary level: closing the achievement and attainment gaps, Table 5.

In regard to retention rates at the post-primary level, for the 2016 cohort, the rate for the Junior Certificate was 95.7% in DEIS schools, slightly lower than 98.1% in non-DEIS schools (Department of Education, 2023[94]). For the Leaving Certificate, the rate stood at 85.0% in DEIS schools compared to 93.4% in non-DEIS schools, indicating a larger gap in retention rates. The most considerable loss of students from the education system occurs between the fifth and sixth post-primary years for non-DEIS schools and from the sixth year to the examination period for DEIS schools. The DEIS gap in retention rates for the Leaving Certificate has decreased from 15.6 percentage points for the 2010 cohort to 7.6 points for the 2015 cohort, rising slightly to 8.4 points for the 2016 cohort (ibid.).

Gender differences

Gender differences have been extensively studied in Ireland. What follows is a very brief selection of some of the most recent work rather than a comprehensive overview. At the primary level, based on NAMER 2021 data, second-class girls achieved significantly higher results than boys in reading in DEIS Urban Band 1 and non-DEIS schools (Nelis and Gilleece, 2023[76]). No significant differences were found in DEIS Urban Band 2 schools. In mathematics, in the sixth class, boys outperformed girls in all types of DEIS/non-DEIS schools (Figure 1.14). However, the gender difference in mean mathematics scores in DEIS Urban Band 1 schools was not statistically significant. Gender differences in DEIS Urban Band 2 schools were more marked and nearly twice as large as the gender difference in non-DEIS urban schools. These results align with those observed in NAMER 2014 (ibid.).

Figure 1.14. Gender differences at primary level (2021)
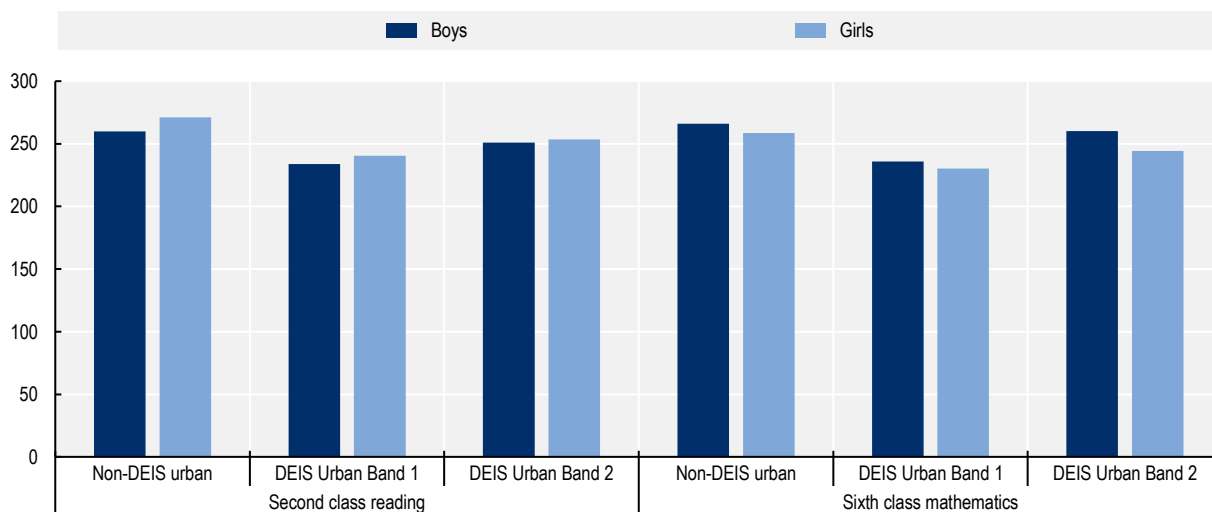
Source: Nelis and Gilleece (2023[76]), Ireland's National Assessments of Mathematics and English Reading 2021: A focus on achievement in urban DEIS schools, Tables A3.4 and A4.4.

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Gender gaps persist into the post-primary level. Boys aged 15 scored higher than same-aged girls in mathematics in PISA 2022 (497.8 vs. 485.1 points) (Donohue et al., 2023[89]). This gender gap was significantly larger than the average OECD gap. However, while a similar proportion of boys and girls performed below Level 2 in the assessment, a substantially higher percentage of boys performed at or above Level 5 (9.6%) compared to girls (4.7%), a pattern observed in many other countries and previous cycles (Donohue et al., 2023[89]; Shiel et al., 2022[98]). Boys have consistently outperformed girls in PISA mathematics since 2012, although the 2018 gap was insignificant (Donohue et al., 2023[89]).

In reading, girls outperformed boys by 18.3 points in 2022, a significantly smaller gender gap than the OECD average of 24.2 points (Donohue et al., 2023[89]). A substantially greater proportion of boys performed below proficiency Level 2 in reading. At or above Level 5, there were no significant differences. The gender gap in reading literacy achievement has widened between 2015 and 2022 (ibid.).

Finally, boys achieved a mean score of 506.6 in science, while girls achieved a mean score of 501.0 (Donohue et al., 2023[89]). The difference of 5.6 points was not significant. Similar percentages of boys (16.1%) and girls (15.0%) performed below the baseline level of proficiency in science (Level 2), but a significantly greater percentage of boys (9.5%) achieved at Levels 5-6 compared to girls (5.5%) (ibid.).

Gender gaps in the PISA 2018 cycle have also been analysed in reference to the DEIS status (Gilleece et al., 2020[95]). Gender differences (in favour of girls) in reading in DEIS and non-DEIS post-primary schools were statistically significant. In mathematics, the gender gap (in favour of boys) was only significant in non-DEIS schools. In science, the difference was not statistically significant (ibid.).

In administrative datasets, girls outperformed boys by approximately the same magnitude in DEIS and non-DEIS schools at the start of the DEIS programme in 2007 (Weir and Kavanagh, 2018[78]).[8] Since then, the gender gap in DEIS schools remained stable until 2016 and widened marginally in non-DEIS schools. Furthermore, the gap between girls in non-DEIS and DEIS schools has narrowed since the introduction of the programme, as has the gap between boys in non-DEIS and DEIS schools (ibid.). Researchers have also pointed to a greater impact of the "social context effect" amongst boys and the fact that social class interacts with gender in important ways (Sofroniou, Archer and Weir, 2004[99]). As such, neither boys nor girls are homogenous groups (Nelis and Gilleece, 2023[76]).

Differences by immigrant background

In the last decades, Ireland has witnessed a significant increase in migration, leading to heightened academic interest and the formulation of policies centred around integrating migrants. Even though most immigrants have European origins, census data reveal a significant rise in the number and proportion of individuals identifying with an ethnicity other than white Irish between 2011 and 2016 (CSO, 2023[100]). Language diversity among individuals with an immigrant background is also notable, with a substantial percentage indicating languages other than English or Irish spoken at home (CSO, 2023[101]).

Naturally, this type of diversity permeates the education system, with a higher proportion of non-Irish nationals in DEIS primary schools and a higher proportion of non-Irish-born students in DEIS Post-primary schools in 2015/16 (Department of Education, 2017[102]). Students with Irish-born parents were also more likely to attend non-DEIS primary schools (Darmody, McGinnity and Russell, 2022[103]). In the second class at the primary level, the percentages of students born outside Ireland ranged from 12.4% to 21.9%, with a higher share in DEIS Urban Band 2 schools than DEIS Urban Band 1 or non-DEIS urban schools (Gilleece and Nelis, 2023[91]). In the sixth class, the shares ranged from 8.0% in non-DEIS urban to 17.3% in DEIS Urban Band 2 schools (ibid.). The share of students who spoke a language other than English or Irish at home increased from 6-9% (depending on class level) in 2007 to 13-17% in 2016 in DEIS Urban primary schools (Kavanagh and Weir, 2018[92]). The shares were similar for DEIS Urban Band 1 and 2 schools (ibid.). In 2021, the share of students who never spoke English at home ranged from 2.9% to 9.1%, depending on the DEIS type and primary school class (Gilleece and Nelis, 2023[91]). DEIS Urban Band 2 schools had the highest percentages and non-DEIS urban schools had the lowest (ibid.). Naturally, enrolment of students with an immigrant background in particular schools is often influenced by housing policy and availability.

At the post-primary level, 17.4% of 15-year-old students had an immigrant background in PISA 2022, compared to 12.9% on average across OECD countries (Donohue et al., 2023[89]). Eight percent of students in Ireland were first-generation immigrant students, while 9.4% were second-generation students (ibid.). As in other countries, Irish students with an immigrant background were socio-economically more

disadvantaged compared to their native peers (ibid.). At the post-primary level, the percentages of first-generation students were similar in DEIS and non-DEIS post-primary schools (10%), and the percentages of second-generation immigrants were slightly higher in non-DEIS schools (8% vs 7%) in 2018 (Nelis and Gilleece, 2023[76]). Similar percentages of students in DEIS (15%) and non-DEIS schools (11%) were reported by principals to have first languages other than English or Irish (ibid.).

Students who spoke a language other than English or Irish at home exhibited notable variations in academic achievement. Research based on NAMER 2021 data showed that those born in Ireland achieved higher reading results in non-DEIS urban primary schools in the second class (Gilleece and Nelis, 2023[91]). In contrast, those born in Ireland had a lower average mathematics score in the sixth class in DEIS Urban Band 1 schools (ibid.). The same data also showed that, on the one hand, more frequent use of English at home was associated with higher reading scores in the second class, on the other hand, the reverse was true for sixth-class students and mathematics scores. Other sources revealed that English language achievement of children aged 3 and 5 was lower for those having two parents who were non-native English speakers, regardless of the country of origin (Darmody, McGinnity and Russell, 2022[103]). Indeed, at the age of three, 60% of children with both parents born abroad were in the bottom quintile of English language/reading achievement, compared to 20% overall. However, at the age of nine, 28% of children with both parents born abroad were in this lowest quintile, compared to 20% overall (ibid.). Those who had one parent who was a native English speaker or foreign-born did not differ from children whose both parents were native English speakers or foreign-born (ibid.).

Despite the positive developments, gaps persist. Across all primary classes, students who spoke a language other than English or Irish often had lower average reading achievement than their peers (Kavanagh and Weir, 2018[92]; McGinnity, Darmody and Murray, 2015[104]). However, in mathematics, these students outperformed their peers in all classes except second, where the difference was negligible (Kavanagh and Weir, 2018[92]). Multilevel models that considered factors such as student background, home climate, student attitudes and aspirations, and the school context indicate that students who spoke a language other than English or Irish at home had significantly lower reading scores, although the results were not universal (Kavanagh and Weir, 2018[92]; McGinnity, Darmody and Murray, 2015[104]). Analyses of NAMER 2009 and 2014 mathematics results show that students born outside of Ireland underperformed those born in the country. However, the differences disappeared once students' socio-economic background and other factors were considered (Karakolidis et al., 2021[105]).

At the post-primary level, 15-year-old students with an immigrant background scored significantly lower in mathematics and reading based on PISA 2022 results (non-significant difference for science) (OECD, 2023[84]). However, the differences disappeared once socio-economic background and language spoken at home were accounted for (Figure 1.15). The differences were also smaller compared to the OECD average.

Figure 1.15. Mathematics performance by immigrant background (2022)

Score-point difference in mathematics performance associated with an immigrant background
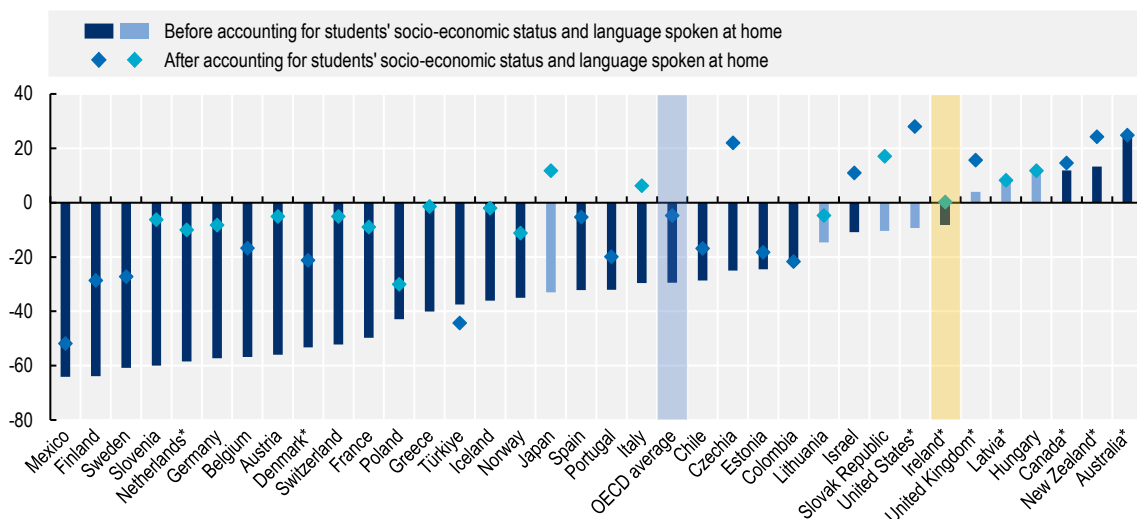
Note: * Caution is required when interpreting estimates because one or more PISA sampling standards were not met (see Reader's Guide, Annexes A2 and A4 in OECD (2023[84])). The PISA index of economic, social and cultural status measures the socio-economic profile. Statistically significant differences are shown in darker tones.
Countries are ranked in ascending order of the difference before accounting for students' socio-economic status and language spoken at home.
Source: OECD (2023[84]), PISA 2022 Results (Volume I): The State of Learning and Equity in Education, Table I.B1.7.52, https://doi.org/10.1787/53f23881-en.

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Performance of Traveller and Roma students

The "Traveller community" in Ireland is defined as "the community of people who are commonly called Travellers and who are identified (both by themselves and others) as people with a shared history, culture and traditions including, historically, a nomadic way of life on the island of Ireland" (Government of Ireland, 2000, p. 7[106]). In 2022, 32 949 Irish Travellers were residing in the country, an increase of 6% from 2016 (CSO, 2023[107]). Irish Travellers were younger, with an average age of 27 compared to 39 in the general population (ibid.). However, they face several disadvantages. For instance, 15% of Travellers experienced "a long-lasting condition or difficulty to a great extent" (e.g. disability), nearly twice the rate for the total population (ibid.). Furthermore, infant mortality, suicide and incarceration rates were higher and labour force participation rates were lower among Travellers than in the general population (CSO, 2023[108]; Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 2017[109]).

"Roma community" is not formally defined, but it is made up of persons of Romanian, Hungarian, Slovakian, Polish and Czech origin (Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 2017[109]). There are no official statistics on the number of Roma in Ireland, but it is estimated to be in the region of 3 000-5 000 (ibid.).

Irish Travellers' education level remained below that of the general population in 2016. Just 13.3% of Traveller women were educated to upper secondary or above compared to 69.1% in the general population (CSO, 2023[108]). Moreover, nearly six in ten Traveller men (57.2%) were educated at the primary level compared to one in ten men in the general population (13.6%) (ibid.). Fewer than 2% of Traveller men and women attained a bachelor's degree or higher, much lower than 25.5% and 30.8% of men and women in the general population, respectively (ibid.). Irish Travellers also experienced higher absence and early

school leaving rates, often stemming from negative experiences (e.g. bullying) at school (Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 2017[109]).

Traveller students also tend to be enrolled more often in DEIS schools. While around a quarter (27.5%) of students attended DEIS schools overall in 2022/23, almost three-quarters of Traveller students attended DEIS schools (74.0%) (Table 1.5). Evidence from other sources also shows that Traveller and Roma students were more likely to attend DEIS Urban Band 1 DEIS primary schools serving the most disadvantaged communities (Smyth, McCoy and Kingston, 2015[66]). Moreover, Traveller and Roma students constituted a relatively high proportion of students in DEIS Post-primary schools (Department of Education, 2023[110]; Smyth, McCoy and Kingston, 2015[66]).

However, the presence of Traveller students in DEIS schools is not necessarily a matter of choice but reflects the socio-economic and other factors considered for inclusion in the DEIS programme. As elaborated in the section on the DEIS programme, the identification for inclusion recognises the educational disadvantage of Traveller and Roma students. Therefore, schools with Traveller and Roma students living in their catchment areas are more likely to be in the programme.

Table 1.5. Traveller students in primary schools (2022/23)

	Number of students	Percent of students	Number of Traveller students	Percent of Traveller students
Non-DEIS	404 434	72.5%	2 158	26.0%
DEIS	153 709	27.5%	6 151	74.0%
Total	558 143	100.0%	8 309	100.0%

Source: Department of Education (2024[1]), OECD Review of resourcing schools to address educational disadvantage: Country Background Report Ireland, Department of Education, Dublin, Ireland, https://s3-eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/govieassets/296017/4d1ac422-5475-470e-b910-4c80a83c43bc.pdf.

Other educational outcomes of Traveller and Roma students also present significant disparities when compared to their counterparts. Based on a sample of DEIS Urban primary schools across all grade levels, average reading and mathematics scores of Traveller students consistently lagged behind those of their peers (Kavanagh and Weir, 2018[92]). The achievement gaps were notable, ranging from 10 standard score points in second-class mathematics to over 14 points in fifth-class reading and mathematics (Table 1.6). Multilevel models that accounted for various factors, such as student background, home climate, student attitudes and aspirations, and school context, reveal a 5.7-point disadvantage in reading and a 4.4-point disadvantage in mathematics (ibid.).

Table 1.6. Reading and mathematics scores of Traveller students at primary schools (2016)

		Traveller students	Non-Traveller students
Reading	Second class	86.1	98.0
	Third class	85.1	96.2
	Fifth class	82.6	97.1
	Sixth class	83.2	95.0
Mathematics	Second class	87.6	97.6
	Third class	87.8	98.9
	Fifth class	84.2	98.4
	Sixth class	83.0	96.3

Note: The scores of students from the Traveller community should be interpreted with caution given that the numbers of students involved were very small and that Traveller students were not explicitly sampled to be representative of the population.
Source: Kavanagh and Weir (2018[92]), The evaluation of DEIS: the lives and learning of urban primary school pupils, 2007-2016, Table 4.4.

At the post-primary level, gaps persist, although they have improved over time (Department of Education, 2023[94]). The retention rate for Junior Certificate stood at 72.2% for the 2016 Traveller cohort, compared to the national average of 97.6%. The rate for Leaving Certificate was 31.4% for Traveller students, a much lower share than 91.7% in the national average. Retention rates have improved over time for Traveller students, rising from 64.4% to 72.2% and from 21.9% to 31.4% for the 2010 and 2016 Junior and Leaving Certificate cohorts, respectively (ibid.).

The Traveller and Roma community's lower educational outcomes underscore the need for sustained support within the education system. As elaborated in Chapter 2, many of these issues are addressed in the National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy 2017 – 2021 (Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 2017[109]). The establishment of the Travellers and Roma Education Fund also acknowledges these educational disparities and seeks to address them (Department of Education, 2024[1]). Moreover, the DoE established the Supporting Traveller and Roma (STAR) pilot project to target attendance, participation and retention, and school completion in Traveller and Roma communities (see Chapter 5).

Well-being outcomes

Recent Irish educational policy has emphasised the importance of student well-being, both in DEIS and non-DEIS schools (Department of Education and Skills, 2019[111]). This priority is reflected in the well-being elements in *Aistear*, the Early Years Curriculum Framework, as part of the provision for Early Learning and Care, in the Social, Personal and Health Education curriculum at the primary level and in Junior Cycle Wellbeing curriculum. In the quality framework underpinning school self-evaluation and the work of the Inspectorate, student well-being has also been recognised "both as an outcome of learning and as an enabler of learning" (Department of Education, 2022, p. 9[112]). As part of the school self-evaluation process, schools must also review the promotion of well-being (Department of Education, 2023[113]).

Well-being outcomes were generally better in Ireland than on average across OECD countries. In 2022, 81% of 15-year-old students in Ireland reported making friends easily at school (OECD average 76%), although only 71% felt they belonged at school (OECD average 75%) (OECD, 2023[27]). Meanwhile, 14% reported feeling lonely at school, and 14% like an outsider or left out of things at school (OECD average 16% and 17%) (ibid.).

Students' satisfaction with life has declined in many countries over recent years, but not in Ireland. In 2022, 19% of Irish 15-year-old students reported being unsatisfied with their lives (OECD, 2023[27]). In 2018, about the same percentage of students were unsatisfied with life (18%). On average across OECD countries, the proportion of students who were not satisfied with life increased from 11% in 2015 to 16% in 2018 and 18% in 2022 (ibid.).

Some 13% of 15-year-old girls and 19% of boys reported being the victim of bullying acts at least a few times a month (OECD average 20% of girls and 21% of boys) (OECD, 2023[27]). On average across OECD countries, fewer students were exposed to bullying in 2022 compared to 2018. For example, only 7% of students reported that other students spread nasty rumours about them in 2022, compared to 11% in 2018. In Ireland, the corresponding proportions also shrank (4% in 2022 compared to 8% in 2018) (ibid.). Disadvantaged students and students with an immigrant background were more likely to be bullied on average across OECD countries, but not so in Ireland (Figure 1.16).

Figure 1.16. Bullying at school (2022)

Percentage of 15-year-old students who reported being bullied at least a few times a month
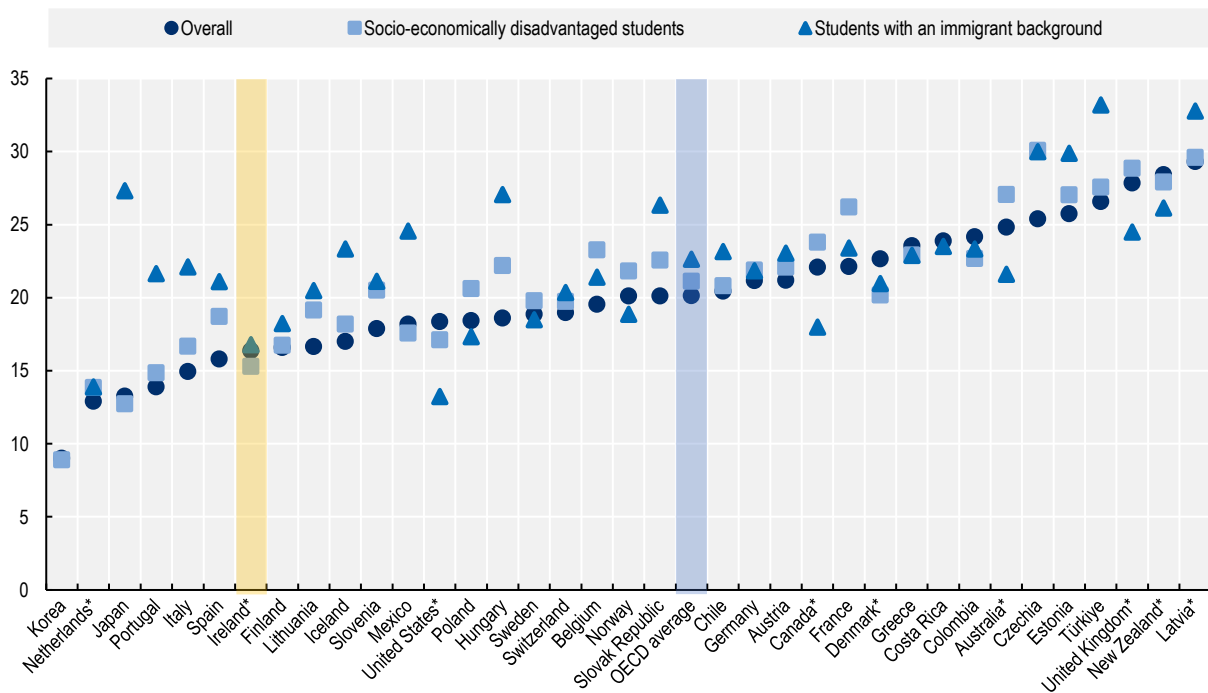
Note: * Caution is required when interpreting estimates because one or more PISA sampling standards were not met (see Reader's Guide, Annexes A2 and A4 in OECD (2023[84])). A socio-economically disadvantaged student is a student in the bottom quarter of the PISA index of economic, social and cultural status (ESCS) in their own country.
Countries are ranked in ascending order of the overall percentage of students who reported being bullied at least a few times a month.
Source: OECD (2023[27]), PISA 2022 Results (Volume II): Learning During – and From – Disruption, Tables II.B1.3.30-31, https://doi.org/10.1787/a97db61c-en.

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Researchers have also looked at well-being outcomes by DEIS status. In PISA 2018, there was no statistically significant difference between the mean scores of students in DEIS and non-DEIS schools on overall meaning in life (Nelis et al., 2021[114]). Similarly, there were no significant differences in other measures of well-being at primary and post-primary levels, such as a sense of belonging and bullying (Gilleece and Nelis, 2023[91]; Nelis and Gilleece, 2023[76]; Nelis et al., 2021[114]). However, upcoming research based on longitudinal data reveals that the socio-emotional well-being of students who attended DEIS Urban Band 1 schools at the primary level and followed on to DEIS Post-primary schools demonstrated higher levels of emotional difficulties, conduct problems, hyperactivity and peer problems (Smyth, Forthcoming[115]). Moving from a non-DEIS primary school into a DEIS Post-primary school was also associated with higher levels of conduct problems and hyperactivity (ibid.). Moreover, some student groups, such as individuals with an immigrant background, differ in their well-being. Children with parents from Australia, Canada, the United States and western Europe, compared to children with Irish parents, had lower self-concept scores despite accounting for other factors linked to child well-being (Darmody, McGinnity and Russell, 2022[103]).

Selected outcomes beyond post-primary education

Transition to further and higher education in Ireland differs by DEIS status (Figure 1.17). In 2021, progression to higher education stood at 43% in DEIS schools and 69% non-DEIS schools, a gap of 26 percentage points (at approximately the same level as in 2015 (28 percentage points)). In contrast, progression to further education and training was higher in DEIS schools (29%) than non-DEIS schools (21%) in 2020.

Figure 1.17. Transitions from post-primary education (2015-2021)

Panel A: To higher education (ISCED 5)   Panel B: To further education and training (ISCED 4)
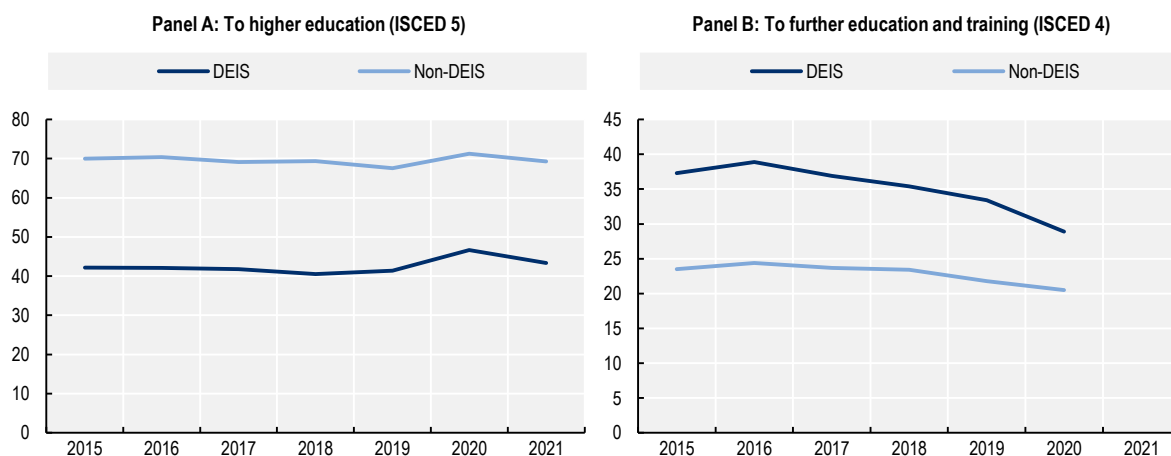
Source: Department of Education (2023[116]), Education Indicators for Ireland: February 2023, https://assets.gov.ie/246552/96fc2eb5-b7c9-4a17-afbc-de288a471b3f.pdf (accessed on 1 December 2023).

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The early leaving from education and training (ELET) rate[9] has evolved positively over the past decade in Ireland. The ELET rate has dropped from 8.7% in 2013 to 3.7% in 2022 (Eurostat, 2023[117]). Ireland had the second lowest ELET rate among EU countries after Croatia in 2022 (ibid.). However, ELET affects specific groups and geographical areas, such as students from disadvantaged areas and disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds, Traveller and Roma young people, and individuals with an immigrant background (European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, Donlevy, Day, Andriescu, et al., 2019[118]). Many areas with high ELET rates are also deprived inner city regions, urban areas or sub-urban areas with limited resources and amenities (ibid.). While ELET rates have decreased substantially, those learners who left early often have more complex and acute needs (ibid.).

In international comparison, the Irish population had a higher proportion of tertiary educated and a lower proportion of low-educated people in 2022. Ireland had 54.4% of 25-64 year-olds tertiary educated in 2022, above the OECD average of 40.4% (OECD, 2023[29]). A third (33.2%) of the population attained upper secondary or post-secondary non-tertiary education (40.2% on average across the OECD), and 12.4% had lower secondary education or below (19.4% on average across the OECD). As in other OECD countries, women were generally better educated than men: 58.1% of women and 50.5% of men attained tertiary education (ibid.).

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Notes

[1] The programme is available to all children who have turned two years and eight months before 31 August provided they will not turn five years and six months on or before 30 June of the programme year.

[2] LCA students can also progress onto Further Education Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) courses, Apprenticeships & Traineeships, the Gardai (national police and security service) and the Defence Forces. LCA students do not have direct access to higher education and must either complete a PLC course or a pre-university access course to progress (CareersPortal, n.d.[119]).

[3] Junior Certificate has now been replaced with Junior Cycle.

[4] Junior schools are primary schools with classes from Junior Infants to second, senior schools from third to sixth, and vertical schools have classes from Junior Infants to sixth.

[5] TIMSS 2023 results will be available in December 2024.

[6] The 2009 PISA cycle is considered to be atypical in Ireland and researchers examined likely reasons for the country's underperformance (see Cosgrove (2011[85]), Cosgrove and Moran (2011[86]), and Cosgrove and Cartwright (2014[87])).

[7] Medical card holders can get certain health services free of charge. Additionally, they receive an examination fee waiver (Weir and Kavanagh, 2018[78]). To qualify for a medical card, the income must be below a certain figure for the family size (Citizens Information, 2023[97]).

[8] Based on Junior Certificate Examinations overall performance scale.

[9] Early leaver from education and training refers to a person aged 18 to 24 who has completed at most lower secondary education and is not involved in further education or training (Eurostat, 2022[120]). It is expressed as a percentage out of the total population aged 18 to 24 (ibid.).

2 Governance of policies to address educational disadvantage

This chapter is about the governance of the DEIS programme and additional supports provided to students at risk of educational disadvantage in Ireland. It analyses Ireland's educational goals for equity and inclusion, the curriculum, the regulatory framework, the responsibilities for the DEIS programme and additional supports, and stakeholder consultation. The country has developed a widely accepted and highly regarded DEIS programme. It also grants considerable importance to stakeholder engagement and the Inspectorate. However, challenges remain in regard to the integration of services across departments and the sharing of good practices in the system and among schools. The chapter provides recommendations to overcome these challenges and strengthen the governance of the DEIS programme and additional supports.

Context and features

Equity and inclusion in educational goals

Equity and inclusion feature prominently in Ireland's educational goals, in terms of international, European and national commitments.

International goals

The Department of Education (DoE) in Ireland is committed to delivering to the United Nations' (UN) 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) and in particular on SDG 4 – Quality Education (United Nations, n.d.[1]). The target under SDG 4.5 is to eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, Indigenous peoples and children in vulnerable situations by 2030 (Department of Education, 2024[2]).

Under the SDG National Implementation Plan, a range of Government and DoE strategies deliver on SDG 4.5 including the National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy 2017-2021, Delivering Equality of Opportunity In Schools (DEIS) Plan and the National Strategy on Education for Sustainable Development.

The SDG National Implementation Plan specifies which departments in Ireland and which strategies are responsible for the implementation of the SDGs. In education, the focus lies on improving the learning experience and success of learners (including those at risk of educational disadvantage). It is the responsibility of the DoE to deliver the Forbairt 2024 Annual Statement of Priorities, the DEIS Plan and the National Strategy on Education for Sustainable Development in Ireland (Government of Ireland, n.d.[3]).

The Annual Statement of Priorities provides a roadmap to the delivery of the strategic and operational priorities set out in our Statement of Strategy 2023-2025 (discussed further below) (Government of Ireland, 2024[4]). This serves the DoE in managing the pace and sequence of change towards longer term strategic goals and to enable the Department to demonstrate ongoing change and reform in the sector and report progress.

Furthermore, Ireland reports on progress to the UN Committee on Social, Economic and Cultural Rights and the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (Department of Education, 2024[2]).

European Union goals

At the European Union (EU) level, there are several strategies and rights that Ireland adheres to. The EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child and the European Child Guarantee are major policy initiatives put forward by the European Commission to better protect all children, to help them fulfil their rights and to place them right at the centre of EU policy making.

The EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child focuses on ensuring that every child in Europe and across the world should enjoy the same rights and live free from discrimination and intimidation of any kind (European Commission, 2021[5]). The strategy incorporates six thematic areas:

- Child participation in political and democratic life;
- Socio-economic inclusion, health and education;
- Combating violence against children and ensuring child protection;
- Child-friendly justice;
- Digital and information society; and
- The global dimension.

The European Child Guarantee aims to break the cycle of disadvantage and poverty across generations. It provides guidance and means for member states to support children in need, i.e. persons under the age of 18 at risk of poverty or social exclusion (European Commission, 2021[5]). Member states need to guarantee free and effective access for children in need of early childhood education and care (ECEC), education and school-based activities, at least one healthy meal each school day, and effective access for children in need to healthy nutrition and adequate housing (European Commission, 2021[6]).

This provides Ireland with an opportunity to re-focus and, where necessary, re-evaluate its approach in tackling child poverty and promoting children's well-being as outlined in The EU Child Guarantee - Ireland's National Action Plan (Government of Ireland, n.d.[7]). The objective of the Guarantee is to prevent and combat social exclusion by guaranteeing access for children who are in need of a range of key services and as such forms a subset to the wider issues revolving around child poverty (Department of Education, 2024[2]). Ireland already provides free school books, free hot meals and a free early childhood care and education scheme (Government of Ireland, 2023[8]).

National goals

In January 2023, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in Geneva expressed admiration for how Ireland had received children fleeing Ukraine. In the Concluding Observations, the Committee recognised the positive steps taken by the state since Ireland's last review in 2016. In particular, they welcomed the progress made with the commencement of the Children First Act (Office of the Attorney General, 2015[9]), Children and Family Relationships Act (Office of the Attorney General, 2015[10]), the Sign Language Act (Office of the Attorney General, 2017[11]) and the adoption of a number of other strategies.

Section H of the Concluding observations on the combined fifth and sixth periodic reports of Ireland refers to the Irish education system (United Nations, 2023[12]). The Committee welcomed the measures to guarantee the right to education for children, including the free education scheme and increased funding under the 2023 budget. The 2024 budget announced further increases back to pre-2011 rates of capitation grants (Government of Ireland, 2023[8]).

However, the Committee recommended that Ireland strengthens measures for ensuring the equal access of children in disadvantaged groups, including Traveller and Roma children, asylum-seeking, refugee and immigrant children, children with disabilities and socio-economically disadvantaged children, to quality education. The main concerns raised by the Committee were in relation to (United Nations, 2023[12]):

- The persistent barriers faced by children in disadvantaged situations to accessing quality education;
- The discriminatory effect of the school-leaving certificate and alternative methods of certification on children in disadvantaged situations;
- The lack of education-related data, disaggregated by ethnic origin, socio-economic background and residence status, to assess the impact of educational policies on such children;
- The establishment of special classes for children with disabilities; and
- Racist and negative stereotyping of migrant and ethnic minority communities in curricula that perpetuate discrimination against such groups of children.

The Committee went on to make a number of recommendations to address these issues, including (United Nations, 2023, pp. 12-13[12]):

- Strengthen measures for ensuring the equal access of children in disadvantaged groups, including Traveller and Roma children, asylum-seeking, refugee and immigrant children, children with disabilities and socio-economically disadvantaged children to quality education;

- Collect and analyse data disaggregated by ethnic origin, socio-economic background and residence status on attendance and completion rates, educational outcomes, use of reduced timetables and participation in afterschool activities;
- Ensure inclusive education in early childhood education and mainstream schools for all children with disabilities by adapting curricular and training and assigning specialised teachers and professionals in integrated classes;
- Implement targeted measures to improve the educational outcomes of Traveller and Roma children at all levels of education, in particular at secondary level, develop the national Traveller education strategy and ensure that such measures are adequately resources and independently evaluated;
- Ensure that parents of refugee children have information on how to register their children in school and that such children have access to quality multilingual and intercultural education;
- Ensure the effective implementation of the guidelines on the use of reduced timetables and develop measures to address their overuse, with a view to preventing their disproportionate use on Traveller and Roma children and children with disabilities;
- Reform the leaving certificate and alternative methods of certification, based on an analysis of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children's access to education, including remote learning, with a view to addressing inequalities and improving educational outcomes for children in disadvantaged situations; and
- Explicitly prohibit the use of restraint and seclusion in educational settings;
- Adopt the Traveller culture and history in education bill and establish an expert advisory group within the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment to eliminate racist and negative stereotyping of ethnic minority groups in textbooks and curricula and develop educative materials that promote intercultural dialogue and foster respect for and appreciation of racial, cultural, gender and other diversities.

Ireland has a number of strategies targeting specific groups of students or specific themes. For example, the National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy 2017-2021 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 (see Chapter 1) 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 (Department of Education, 2022[13]). It is composed of several thematic areas, including cultural identity, education, employment, children, health, gender equality, anti-discrimination, accommodation etc. In education, it focuses on improving access, participation and outcomes for Traveller and Roma students to achieve outcomes equal to those of the majority population, creating a positive culture of respect and protection for the cultural identity of Traveller and Roma students across the education system, and improving opportunities for Traveller and Roma men to engage in culturally appropriate apprenticeships, training and lifelong learning (Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 2021[14]). The DoE is currently developing a new Traveller and Roma Education Strategy (Department of Education, 2024[15]). Another important strategy is the DEIS Plan 2017 which sets out the DoE vision for education in regard to communities at risk of disadvantage and social exclusion (Department of Education, 2023[16]) (see Chapter 1 for more details).

The second National Strategy on Education for Sustainable Development to 2030 promotes and supports the development of the requisite skills, knowledge and attitudes that help everyone to take action for a sustainable future and planet. The Strategy spans the continuum of education in Ireland, from ECCE to third level education and research, and extends beyond to engage with local communities and youth groups through lifelong learning. It sets out five key priority areas for action over the coming years (Department of Education, 2022[17]):

- Advancing policy;
- Transforming learning environments;
- Building capacities of educators;
- Empowering and mobilising young people; and
- Accelerating local level actions.

The Strategy is a cross-government effort between the Department of Education; the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science; and the Department for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Department of Education, 2022[17]).

Other strategies include the Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice, Cineáltas: Action Plan on Bullying and the Digital Strategy for Schools to 2027. More specifically, the DoE Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice 2019 (Government of Ireland, 2019[18]) provides a blueprint for its vision that the experience of children and young people, through their lifetime in the education system, will be one that enhances, promotes, values and nurtures their wellbeing.

The vision and ambition of the DoE in relation to Wellbeing Promotion sets out to ensure that by 2023:

- The promotion of wellbeing will be at the core of the ethos of every school and centre for education;
- All schools and centres for education will provide evidence-informed approaches and support, appropriate to need, to promote the wellbeing of all their children and young people; and
- Ireland will be recognised as a leader in this area.

To implement this policy every school and centre for education is required to use the School Self-Evaluation (SSE) process to initiate a well-being promotion review and development cycle (Government of Ireland, 2019[18]).

The Cineáltas: Action Plan on Bullying has drawn on the Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice 2019, United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisations (UNESCO) Whole Education Approach, as well as national and international research and best practice to develop a robust strategy that places the student at the centre of the school community and at the centre of national education strategy and policy development (Department of Education, 2022[19]). The DoE vision is to provide an education system where every child and young person feels valued and is actively supported and nurtured to reach their full potential. The vision is centred on an Action Plan on Bullying that is aimed to be practical, inclusive and contains a broad range of actions which help everyone to work together towards a diverse, inclusive Irish society free from bullying in all its forms and where individual difference is valued and celebrated (Department of Education, 2022[19]).

Cineáltas is dedicated to the prevention and addressing of bullying, cyber bullying, racist bullying, gender identity bullying and sexual harassment, among other areas, in schools. It is centred on a child right's-based approach and provides a collective vision and clear roadmap for how the whole education community and society can work together to prevent and address bullying in our schools. The implementation plan for Cineáltas was published in April 2023 and commits to implementing each of the 61 actions contained in Cineáltas within a five-year period (Department of Education, 2024[2]).

Cineáltas is rooted in the following four key principles (Department of Education, 2022[19]):

- Prevention: Through the generation of empathy and the provision of training which provides a foundation for knowledge, respect, equality and inclusion;
- Support: Tangible and targeted supports based on a continuum of needs which provide a framework for school communities to work together;
- Oversight: Visible leadership creates positive environments for children and young people and all members of our school community; and

- Community: Building inclusive school communities that are connected to society, and that support and nurture positive relationships and partnerships.

Several actions in Cineáltas seek to strengthen the participation of children and young people at school level and at a national level. For example, the Student Participation Unit was established in the DoE in April 2023. The unit promotes the participation of children and young people into the development and implementation of department policy. An expert group, which includes student representation, has been established to advise the department on how best the department can progress its work on student participation. Professor Laura Lundy, Professor of Education Law and Children's Rights at Queen's University who developed the Lundy Model of children's participation is chair of this expert group. Cineáltas also contains a commitment to support the establishment of student councils in primary and post-primary schools that are representative of the pupils and students in the school.

Another important strategy is the Digital Strategy for Schools to 2027 which aims to support the school system to ensure that all learners have the opportunity to gain the knowledge and skills they need to successfully navigate an ever-evolving digital world. The strategy has been developed following a wide ranging and extensive consultation process and sets out high level objectives under three key pillars (Department of Education, 2022[20]):

- Pillar 1: Supporting the embedding of digital technologies in teaching, learning and assessment;
- Pillar 2: Digital Technology Infrastructure; and
- Pillar 3: Looking to the future: policy, research and digital leadership.

The DoE supports those schools with the highest concentrations of learners at risk of educational disadvantage through the DEIS programme and these schools receive an enhanced allocation under the information and communications technology (ICT) grant (Department of Education, 2022[20]).

Curriculum

The curriculum is determined by the Minister for Education who is advised by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2023[21]). The curriculum sets out not only what is to be taught, but how learning in the particular subject areas is to be assessed. It is the board of management (see Responsibilities at level of primary and post-primary schools), in consultation with the principal and staff of each individual post-primary school that decides the range of subjects to be offered in the school each year. In primary schools, the full primary curriculum should be available and there is no choice of subjects. Provision of subjects and programmes in a given year may be limited by factors such as available teaching personnel, range of subjects to be offered, and overall demand for the subject or programme (Department of Education, 2024[2]).

The curriculum at primary and post-primary levels is aimed at learners from all backgrounds regardless of gender, socio-economic background, ethnicity or creed. It aims to foster inclusivity where equality and diversity are promoted (Department of Education, 2024[2]). The primary curriculum aims to provide a broad learning experience and encourages a rich variety of approaches to teaching and learning that cater for the different needs of children (Curriculum online, n.d.[22]). It is designed to nurture children in all dimensions of their lives – spiritual, moral, cognitive, emotional, imaginative, aesthetic, social and physical (Department of Education, 2024[2]).

Community colleges, community schools, voluntary secondary schools, comprehensive schools and vocational schools are funded by the DoE and deliver the post-primary curriculum determined by the minister for education, supported by syllabuses, specifications, guidelines for teachers, circulars to schools and prescribed material for the examinations. Post-primary education consists of a three-year Junior Cycle, followed by a two- or three-year Senior Cycle, depending on whether the optional Transition Year is taken (Department of Education, 2024[2]). More information on the different cycles is provided in Chapter 1.

The Social Personal Health Education curriculum includes a mandatory element on well-being in all primary and post-primary schools. At post-primary schools, for instance, students commencing Junior Cycle undertake the area of learning Wellbeing. The well-being element includes areas such as Physical Education;, Civic, Social and Political Education; Social, Personal and Health Education (including Relationships and Sexuality Education); and Guidance Counselling (Department of Education, 2024[2]).

Regulatory framework for equity and inclusion

The Education Act of 1998 establishes the responsibility of the Minister for Education to ensure "that there is made available to each person resident in the State, including a person with a disability or who has other special educational needs, support services and a level and quality of education appropriate to meeting the needs and abilities of that person" (Government of Ireland, 1998[23]). Section 32 of the Act defines educational disadvantage as "the impediments to education arising from social or economic disadvantage which prevent students from deriving appropriate benefit from education in schools" (ibid.). There are a number of recent statements of strategy and acts on education.

The Department of Education Statement of Strategy 2023-2025

The DoE Statement of Strategy 2023-2025 identifies the following strategic goals (Department of Education, 2023[24]):

- Goal 1: Enable the provision of high-quality education and improve the learning experience to meet the needs of all children and young people, in schools and early learning and care settings.
- Goal 2: Ensure equity of opportunity in education and that all children and young people are supported to fulfil their potential.
- Goal 3: Together with our partners, provide strategic leadership and support for the delivery of the right systems and infrastructure for the sector.
- Goal 4: Organisational excellence and innovation.

The Statement of Strategy lists a number of Strategic Actions directed at the achievement of Goal 2 above including (Department of Education, 2023[25]):

- Support the mental health and well-being of children and young people through implementation of the Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice and Cineáltas: Action Plan for Bullying ensuring, among other needs, that well-being supports recognise the impact of COVID-19 on children and young people.
- Support the participation and progression of children and young people with special educational needs, in particular the Department of Education working together with the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) and the Health Service Executive (HSE), collaborating in the planning, design and delivery of an integrated suite of education supports for schools and their children and young people.
- Continue to provide for a continuum of education covering the full range of need spanning mainstream classes, through to more specialist placements in a special class or a special school.
- Help children and young people at risk of educational disadvantage to access appropriate education resources which reflect their diverse needs, including supports provided by the Tusla Education Support Service (TESS) and a responsive inspection programme.
- Ensure policy in the area of special education is fully up to date following the review of the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act.
- Through the DEIS programme and supporting students at risk of educational disadvantage across primary and post-primary schools, reduce the retention and achievement gap between schools in the DEIS programme and non-DEIS schools.

Review of Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004

In December 2021, a review of the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004 was announced (Office of Attorney General, 2004[26]), which provides for the education of children aged under 18 years with Special Educational Needs.

The purpose of the review is to ensure that legislation on education for students with special educational needs is up-to-date, fully operational, and reflective of the lived experiences of students and families. This includes those sections of the Act relating to individual education plans. Open collaboration and consultation are at the heart of the review and all stakeholders are being invited to engage with the process.

The review process includes extensive stakeholder engagement, including parents, educators, advocacy groups and experts in special education. Online surveys, launched in November 2022, garnered over 28 000 responses, with a further 4 000 open submissions and qualitative analysis of open submissions is underway. A variety of focus group methods are being employed, including mixed focus groups, mosaic-style engagement with children with special educational needs, and discussions with young adults who have experienced the special educational need model of education. Focus groups commenced in February 2024. Various methods of focus groups have been used in this review including a beacons style approach for adult stakeholders where all are present and discuss a given topic with equal say in the discussion and a mosaic style approach for children with special educational needs where children of all abilities were invited to engage and supported to give their views. An easy access survey will be made available shortly. This accessible online consultation platform is designed to accommodate individuals who may face challenges with traditional survey methods. The review involves an academic assessment and considers legal cases and international comparators. The review is due to be finalised in Q3 2024 (Government of Ireland, Forthcoming 2024[27]).

New Education (Provision in Respect of Children with Special Educational Needs) Act 2022

The new Education (Provision in Respect of Children with Special Educational Needs) Act was signed into law in 2022 (Office of the Attorney General, 2022[28]). The amendment to Section 67 of the Education Act 1998 provides for the NCSE to designate a school place for a student with special educational needs. This measure should be of particular benefit by increasing the level of support to parents seeking a school place for a child with special educational needs. The provisions allowing for a school to appeal a decision to designate to an appeals committee and the provision allowing a parent to appeal a decision not to designate to an appeals committee have been removed.

Responsibilities for DEIS programme and students at risk of educational disadvantage at national level

Ireland has a largely centralised system of education supported by significant local control in terms of school ownership, trusteeship and management. The DoE is responsible for the formulation and review of educational policies, the allocation of resources in terms of funding and provision for human resources to schools, as well as the administration and the assurance of quality in education. The DoE works in partnership with trustees, school boards of management and other bodies that support effective governance of schools. It is responsible for the DEIS programme and for additional supports for students at risk of educational disadvantage.

Department of Education

The DoE was established under the Ministers and Secretaries Act, 1924 (Office of the Attorney General, n.d.[29]). The aim of the Department is to ensure the provision of a comprehensive, cost-effective and accessible education system of the highest quality as measured by international standards. The Minister

for Education, who is a member of the Government and responsible to *Dáil Éireann* (Irish Parliament), has specific responsibility for education policy issues. At the DoE, the Minister is assisted by the a Minister of State at the Department of Education with special responsibility for Special Education and Inclusion, and by a Minister of State at the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media and the Department of Education with special responsibility for Sport and Physical Education (Department of Education, 2024[2]).

At the head of the DoE is the Secretary General, who acts as Chief Executive Officer. The Secretary General has overall responsibility for implementing and monitoring policy and delivering outputs, and for providing policy advice to the Minister and Government. In managing the Department, the Secretary General is assisted by the Management Board representing the most senior officials in the Department.

The Education Act 1998 ensures formal provision for the education "of every person in the State, including any person with a disability or who has other special educational needs" (Government of Ireland, 1998[23]). Under the Education Act 1998 all schools are managed by the school board of management except in the case of schools which are managed by the local Education and Training Board (ETB) (see section below on Responsibilities at level of primary and post-primary schools). The Minister sets the terms and conditions of employment of teachers, controls allocation numbers and regulates a whole range of areas that impact on day-to-day school management. The Education Act 1998 provides a statutory framework for the Irish education system at primary and post-primary levels. The Act sets out the broad objectives and principles underpinning the education system and provides for the rights of children and others to education. It sets out the functions and responsibilities of all key partners in the education system, seeks the establishment of boards of management for all recognised schools, and lays down accountability procedures. The Act also clarifies the roles and responsibilities of the Minister, school patrons, boards of management, principals and teachers.

All recognised schools operate under provisions of the Education Act 1998, other relevant legislation, circulars of the DoE, the Governance Manual for Primary Schools (Department of Education, 2019[30]) and the Rules and Programme for Secondary schools (Government of Ireland, 2004[31]).

The DoE is responsible for the formulation and review of educational policies, the allocation of resources in terms of funding and teachers to schools, as well as the administration and the assurance of quality in education. The DoE mission is to facilitate children and young people, through learning, to achieve their full potential and contribute to Ireland's social, economic and cultural development (Department of Education, 2024[2])

Units and sections within the Department of Education

Within the DoE, several units and sections play an important role in the DEIS programme and additional supports provided to students at risk of educational disadvantage, as listed below (Department of Education, 2024[2]).

The **Social Inclusion Unit** is responsible for developing and promoting a coordinated department response to tackling educational disadvantage (Department of Education, 2023[32]). It takes care of:

- The DEIS programme that sets out the department's vision for education to become a proven pathway to better opportunities for those in communities at risk of disadvantage and social exclusion;
- Traveller and Roma education policy;
- High Support Special Schools, Youth Encounter Projects and Children Detention Schools;
- Integration – migrant policy;
- Home School Community Liaison Scheme (HSCL);
- Out-of-school education provision;

- School Completion Programme (SCP);
- Free School Books Schemes; and
- DoE oversight of Tusla Education Support Service.

Social Inclusion Unit also has responsibility for Early Start Programme. This is a preschool project to meet the needs of children, aged between three and five, who are at risk of not reaching their potential in school. The project involves enhancing the child's overall development, helping to prevent school failure and reducing the effects of social disadvantage. The Early Start Programme encourages parents or guardians to get involved as much as possible (Department of Education, 2022[33])

Another relevant project is the Rutland Street Pre-School Project (Holy Child Pre-school) which is a two-year pre-primary programme catering for 3-5 year-olds. Although not part of Early Start, it was used to pilot many of the approaches later incorporated in the Early Start project (Department of Education, 2021[34]).

Early Years Unit in the DoE aims to ensure that education policy developments in the early childhood sector are developed within an overall strategic policy framework for children.

Special Education Section of the DoE is responsible for the development of educational policy for children with special educational needs and the development of comprehensive, efficient and effective education services for these children.

Curriculum and Assessment Policy Unit is responsible for the support of the development of overall policy relating to assessment, curricula and guidance particularly for the primary and the post-primary sectors.

School Transport Section of the Department determines policy relating to school transport and administers the School Transport Schemes.

Central Policy Unit is responsible for leading on policy development across a range of areas including higher education policy, further education and training policy, skills development policy, research policy, international education policy and legislation.

International Co-operation Unit manages the Department's engagement with international partners, including the EU, Council of Europe, OECD and UNESCO, to enhance international policy co-operation in education and training. It also has responsibility for policy development and coordination in the promotion of Ireland as a centre for international education.

Parents and Learners Unit has responsibility for oversight of child protection, for supporting the implementation of Cineáltas: Action Plan on Bullying and for the Student Participation Unit whose remit is to promote the participation of children and young people into the development of department policy.

Finance Unit provides a financial framework and control system for the Department in accordance with government financial and statutory requirements.

Planning and Building Unit is responsible for identifying the need for school accommodation, setting out the technical specifications for educational buildings, ensuring that standards are maintained and prioritising the allocation of resources.

Teacher Allocation Unit allocates staffing resources to primary, post-primary, community and comprehensive schools and ETBs in accordance with departmental and government policy.

North/South Co-operation Section co-ordinates and develops co-operation and common action in education between both parts of the island of Ireland and with relevant institutions in the United States and EU, in the context of the Good Friday Agreement.

School Governance Section supports the effective governance, management and operation of schools by providing guidance, information and direction to schools and ETBs on governance and policy issues that impact on the day-to-day management of schools.

Teacher Education Section reflects the Department's view of teacher education as a continuum from initial teacher education to induction and continuing professional learning. It promotes the quality of teaching and learning through the provision of quality teacher training programmes, continuing professional learning and support for principals and teachers.

Gaeltacht Education Unit is responsible for implementing the Policy on Gaeltacht Education 2017-2022, which aims to improve the quality of Irish-medium education in Gaeltacht schools and early-years settings.

The Inspectorate

The Inspectorate is the division of the DoE responsible for the evaluation of primary and post-primary schools and centres for education. The Inspectorate also supports the monitoring of quality in Early Learning and Care settings in collaboration with the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY). Inspectors provide advice on a range of educational issues to school communities, policy makers in the department and to the wider educational system (Department of Education, 2023[35]).

The Inspectorate:

- Provides an assurance of quality and public accountability in the education system;
- Carries out inspections in schools, centres for education, early learning and care settings providing state-funded ECCE programme;
- Conducts thematic evaluations focused on specific aspects of provision;
- Promotes best practice and school improvement by advising teachers, principals and boards of management in schools;
- Publishes inspection reports on individual schools and centres for education as well as composite reports arising from a series of inspections focused on particular themes (such as DEIS, provision of English as an additional language);
- Reports on curriculum provision, teaching, learning and assessment generally in the educational system;
- Promotes the Irish language; and
- Provides advice to policy makers in the DoE and to the wider educational system.

National Educational Psychological Service

The National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) is a division of the DoE that provides an educational psychological service to all primary and post-primary schools and special schools to support the well-being, academic, social and emotional development of all learners. The NEPS Model of Service is a consultative, capacity-building model, in which there is a balance between casework and work of a more preventative or developmental nature, which is referred to as Support and Development work, and includes general consultation for teachers. The service provides access for all schools to:

- Psychological support in the event of a Critical Incident;
- A Casework Service for individual children where there is a need for intensive consultation and assessment via a NEPS psychologist or through the Scheme for the Commissioning of Psychological Assessments;
- A school staff Support and Development Service, to build school capability to provide a comprehensive continuum of support in schools; and

- Ongoing access to advice and support for schools.

NEPS psychologists are assigned schools based on a weighting process which takes into account school size, DEIS status, gender mix and geographical spread and equating roughly to a 4 500:1 student to psychologist ratio. Depending on demographics, the number of schools an individual psychologist may be allocated can be within a range of 10 to 35. DEIS schools receive priority access to the support of the NEPS (Department of Education, 2024[2]).

Department of Education bodies

Several agencies, councils and commissions are also involved in supporting students at risk of educational disadvantage.

The **National Council for Special Education (NCSE)** was set up as an agency of the DoE to improve the delivery of education services to persons with special educational needs arising from disabilities with particular emphasis on children. The Council was first established as an independent statutory body in 2003. The NCSE has responsibility for the delivery of education services to children and young people with special educational needs. In fulfilling this responsibility, the NCSE supports primary and post-primary schools in establishing special classes for children and young people with special educational needs, typically autism (Department of Education, 2024[2]; National Council for Special Education, n.d.[36]).

Tusla Education Support Service (TESS), an agency of the DoE, is comprised of three service strands which provide support to students and families at risk of experiencing educational disadvantage. These strands are:

- Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) Scheme, which engages with parents and caregivers of students in DEIS schools, with a particular focus on engaging with the parents of children and young persons identified as at risk of early leaving from education and training, Traveller, Roma and immigrant families. TESS has responsibility for setting the work plan of the HSCL Coordinator and provision of an extensive suite of continuous professional development to support the HSCL Coordinators in their work. The principal of the HSCL base school is the manager.
- School Completion Programme (SCP) is a programme of support to children and young people at risk of educational disadvantage. TESS has responsibility for the allocation of annualised funding to the SCP and for the provision of an extensive suite of continuous professional development to support the SCP staff with practice and operations at frontline level.
- Educational Welfare Service (EWS) is the statutory service, operating under the Education (Welfare) Act, 2000, which works with children, young people and families experiencing difficulties with school attendance (Department of Education, 2024[2]).

Tusla Alternative Education Assessment and Registration Services (AEARS), an agency of the DoE, is responsible for regulating the provision of education to children who are educated in places outside of a recognised school. Parents have a statutory obligation to apply to Tusla to register their child as being educated outside of a recognised school. Tusla AEARS function is to carry out an assessment of the educational provision for children, in order to determine if a child can be placed on the statutory register of children educated outside of a recognised school (Department of Education, 2024[2]).

The **Educational Research Centre (ERC)** is an agency of the DoE and an internationally recognised centre of excellence in research, assessment and evaluation in education. The ERC carries out research at all levels of the education system. Research is undertaken on behalf of the DoE, at the request of other agencies and on the initiative of the ERC itself and its staff (Department of Education, 2024[2]; ERC, 2023[37]).

The **National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA)** is a statutory agency of the DoE. The NCCA advises the Minister for Education on curriculum and assessment for early childhood education,

primary and post-primary schools and assessment procedures used in schools and examinations on subjects which are part of the curriculum (Department of Education, 2024[2]). The members of the Council represent the partners in education, industry and trade union interests, parents' organisations and other educational interests. The Council also includes one nominee each of the Minister for Education and the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2023[21]).

The **Teaching Council** is a body of the DoE established as a Statutory body under the Teaching Council Act. It operates as an independent regulatory body for the teaching profession, and promotes and regulates professional standards in teaching. The Teaching Council acts in the interests of the public good while upholding and enhancing standards in the teaching profession. It promotes and supports the highest standards in teachers' professionalism and teacher education through effective policies, regulation and research (Department of Education, 2024[2]).

Additional education bodies

Education and Training Boards are statutory education authorities with responsibility for education and training, youth work and a range of other statutory functions. There are 16 regional Education and Training Boards who manage and operate a number of community national schools, post-primary schools, further education schools, further education (FE) colleges, and a range of adult and further education centres delivering education and training programmes (Department of Education, 2024[2]).

The **State Examinations Commission** was established as a statutory agency of the DoE and assumed responsibility for the operation of the State Certificate Examinations from 2003 onwards. The State Examinations Commission is responsible for the development, assessment, accreditation and certification of the second-level examinations of the Irish state: Junior Cycle and the Leaving Certificate (Department of Education, 2024[2]; State Examinations Commission, 2023[38]).

Other relevant departments

Besides the DoE, other departments are also directly or indirectly involved with DEIS schools and supports provided to children at risk of educational disadvantage.

Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth

The Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) has overall policy responsibility for Early Learning and Care. The DCEDIY is responsible, in the main, for pre-primary education and care while the DoE provides limited specialist pre-school provision related to socio-economic disadvantage including the Early Start Programme (Department of Education, 2022[33]) and the Rutland Street Pre-School Project (Department of Education, 2021[34]). In May 2024, the DCEDIY announced the introduction of an Equal Start Programme, which is a major new model of government-funded supports to ensure children experiencing disadvantage can access and meaningfully participate in early learning and childcare (Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 2024[39]).

Department of Social Protection

The Department of Social Protection's (DSP) mission is to promote active participation and inclusion in society through the provision of income supports, employment services and other services. One of its main functions is to advise government and formulate appropriate social protection and social inclusion policies (Department of Social Protection, n.d.[40]).

The DSP provides funding for the school meals programme to all DEIS schools. The School Meals Scheme is under the remit of the Department of Social Protection and provides funding towards the provision of food services to some 1 600 schools and organisations benefitting 260 000 children. The objective of the programme is to provide regular, nutritious food to children to support them in taking full advantage of the education provided to them (Department of Social Protection, 2023[41]). The programme is an important component of policies to encourage school attendance and extra educational achievement. This scheme will be extended to a further 900 primary schools from 2024 (Department of Education, 2024[2]).

Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science

The Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS) was created in August 2020 as part of the reorganisation of governmental departments under the 32nd Government of Ireland under Taoiseach Micheál Martin. The new department was created to ensure that people are equipped with the skills needed to adapt to living and working sustainably in an increasingly global, digital and automated world.

The DFHERIS funds and creates policy for the higher and further education and research sectors. It also oversees the work of the state agencies and public institutions operating in these areas. The department has many policies and strategies to support access to further and higher education for diverse groups of students, including Traveller and Roma students, and immigrant students. One of the main goals of the Statement of Strategy 2023-2025 is to support inclusion. More specifically, it "strives to ensure that learners all across the tertiary system are enabled to access the supports they require, in particular to meet the needs of vulnerable learners, people with disabilities and those from a background of disadvantage so as to promote widespread engagement with the education and skills systems and in turn contribute to individual, community and national growth and prosperity" (Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, 2023[42]).

Department of the Taoiseach

The Department of the Taoiseach (Prime Minister) incorporates the Child Poverty and Well-Being Programme Office which was established by the-then Taoiseach in spring 2023 to co-ordinate government actions that reduce child poverty and foster children's well-being (Government of Ireland, 2023[43]) (see more on the Programme Office later in the chapter).

Department of Health

The Department of Health and the Health Service Executive provide a range of services to school-age children and their families which have an important impact on school attendance, participation and progression. Services to support oral language and other therapeutic services can significantly improve engagement with education and positive outcomes for children in need of these additional services, particularly where these are made available at pre-school age. Mental health services are also identified as an important support, particularly for post-primary-aged students. While these are universal services, they are especially important to children at higher risk of educational disadvantage, particularly when they are attending schools with the highest levels of complexity of need (Department of Education, 2021[44]).

There are several other government departments and agencies who, while not allocating resources directly to schools in the DEIS programme, provide supports and policies aimed at supporting children and young people experiencing disadvantage. These departments and agencies include the Department of Rural and Community Development; Pobal; Department of Housing, Local government and Heritage; Department of Justice; and the Department of Public Expenditure, National Development Plan Delivery and Reform. Others include the Central Statistics Office, the Ombudsman for Children and the International Protection Accommodation Service.

Responsibilities at level of primary and post-primary schools

While the DoE sets out the rules of procedures for recognised schools, it is not directly involved in the management of schools. The governance structure of schools is such that, in accordance with the Education Act 1998, all schools have a patron which sets the ethos for the school. Schools have a board of management appointed by the patron to manage the school. The patron of a school does not have a direct role in the day-to-day management of the school which in most schools is a matter for the board of management. The functions of a board of management are set out in the Education Act 1998 (Department of Education, 2024[2]). Most children attend state-funded schools which are owned and managed by private organisations (mainly church authorities and religious organisations at the primary level, with greater diversity at the secondary level (OECD, 2020[45]), see also Chapter 1).

In general, all schools have the same management structure, i.e. they have a patron, board of management and a principal. While the Minister for Education sets the policy direction for schools, responsibility for the school is vested in the school patron or trustee. The patron delegates responsibility for the running of the school to the board of management. The school's board of management communicate with parents and teachers to ensure the smooth running of the school for the benefit of the children in the school (Department of Education, 2024[2]).

Role of patrons/trustees

The patron is the body that establishes and operates the school and is responsible for the school's characteristic spirit and ethos. Section 14 of the Education Act 1998 places a duty on the patron of a recognised school, for the purposes of ensuring that such a school is managed in a spirit of partnership, to appoint, where practicable, a board of management.

The school patron is the person/body recognised as such by the Minister for Education in accordance with section 8 of the Education Act 1998. A trustee or Trust can also be a patron. This is the preferred legal structure of some of the religious orders that up until recently were school patrons in their own right. For example, the Le Chéile Schools Trust is patron of the schools of 15 religious congregations. The trust conducts the legal and financial role that was previously performed by the individual congregations. Another example is the Edmund Rice Schools Trust, which is the trustee and patron of 96 schools, both primary and post-primary (Department of Education, 2024[2]).

Trusteeship can also relate to the ownership of the school property as opposed to the running of the school operating from the property. Most Diocesan school properties are either owned on behalf of the Dioceses in the name of the Dioceses Bishop or Archbishop, or are in the ownership of a Diocesan Trust controlled by trustees appointed by the Catholic patron, including the local Bishop (Department of Education, 2024[2]).

In general, the trustees are the persons who are parties to the lease of the school premises and are normally nominated by the patron as trustees of the school. The trustees undertake that the buildings shall continue to be used as a school for the term of the lease and guarantee that the premises and contents are insured against fire and tempest. In the case of Catholic Schools, in most dioceses, the school property and enterprise are held by the Diocesan Trust. In a congregation owned school the trustees are those legally named as such by the religious congregation. In the case of Convent, Monastery schools and schools owned by a Trust, while the bishop is patron, ownership may rest with the Diocese, Congregation Trust or a Catholic Trust Body. In some schools there may not be any trustees e.g. in cases where the school premises is in the direct ownership of the school patron. Almost 90% of schools are under religious patronage, predominantly Roman Catholic (Department of Education, 2024[2]).

Role of Education and Training Boards

Education and Training Boards (ETBs) are statutory education authorities with responsibility for education and training, youth work and a range of other statutory functions. They are regionally defined. ETBs manage and operate community national schools, post-primary schools, FE colleges, and a range of adult and further education centres delivering education and training programmes (Department of Education, 2024[2]). The ETBs are established under, and governed according to, the Education and Training Boards Act 2013.

The ETB is the patron of the schools they manage for the purposes of the Education Act 1998. The ETB is the corporate entity and the employer of school staff. The ETB has ultimate responsibility for employment and financial matters. Each year, the ETB allocates a budget to the school and the board of management has a responsibility for how this budget allocation is spent and accounted for. The board of management is responsible for ensuring the effective implementation of policies and legislation as appropriate. There is on-going support, advice, oversight and governance from the ETB through the Director of Schools, the Director of Organisation Support and Development, the Board, and The Audit and Risk and Finance Committees in the ETB (Department of Education, 2024[2]).

Role of boards of management

Schools are managed locally by independent voluntary boards of management that have been established by the founding patron and are representative of teacher, parent, community and patron interests. Each school has its own board of management. Boards of management are typically comprised of members nominated by the patron of the school, parents of children attending the school, the principal and a member of the teaching staff, and community representatives (Department of Education, 2024[2]).

While the DoE sanctions teaching posts and pays teacher salaries, the board of management is the employer of teachers in a school. The board's role as an employer includes responsibility for the recruitment and dismissal of teachers and other staff within the school, subject to relevant department circulars, employment legislation and sectoral agreements. The board of management manages the school on behalf of the patron and is accountable to the patron and the Minister. The board must uphold the characteristic spirit (ethos) of the school and is accountable to the patron for so doing. In the case of schools established or maintained by an ETB the relevant ETB is the employer. In the case of ETB schools, the role of employment and paymaster is combined under each ETB (Department of Education, 2024[2]).

The board of management must have regard to the efficient use of resources and accountability to students, their parents, the patron, staff and the community served by the school. Proper accounts and records of all monies received and expended must be kept and the board must ensure each year that the accounts are properly audited or certified. In addition, the board must make arrangements for the preparation of the school plan and ensure that it is regularly reviewed and updated.

Boards of management are supported through guidance documentation, advice, training and funding provided by the relevant management bodies and the DoE and also through the work of the principal who typically acts as secretary to the board at primary level.

The board of management decides the range of subjects to be offered in the school each year in consultation with the principal and staff. Provision of subjects and programmes in a given year may be limited by factors such as available teaching personnel, range of subjects to be offered and overall demand for the subject or programme (Department of Education, 2024[2]).

The agreed composition and procedures for the appointment of boards of primary schools are set out in the DoE publication the Governance Manual for Primary Schools 2023-2027. This publication is reviewed every four years, following consultation with the education partners, representing school management,

parents and teachers, in advance of the appointment of new boards (Department of Education, 2024[2]; Department of Education, 2023[46]; Department of Education, 2023[46]).

The Governance Manual for Primary Schools 2019-2023 indicates the composition of the board of management for schools having a recognised staff of more than one teacher as:

1. Two direct nominees of the patron.
2. Two parents elected from parents of children who are enrolled and have commenced attendance at the school (one being a mother, the other a father, elected by the general body of parents of children who are enrolled and have commenced attendance at the school).
3. The principal (or acting principal) of the school.
4. One other serving teacher on the staff of the school, elected by vote of the teaching staff which includes the principal.
5. Two extra members proposed by those nominees, described in 1 to 4 above.

There are three sectors at post-primary level and there are some differences in the composition of boards of management between the three sectors:

1. The boards of management of voluntary secondary schools are constituted and operate in accordance with the Articles of Management of such schools.
2. Boards of management of ETB schools are sub-committees of the ETB in accordance with the Education and Training Boards Act 2013.
3. Community and Comprehensive schools are managed and operated by boards of management of differing compositions appointed in accordance with the relevant Deed of Trust for such schools.

The members of the board must be appointed by the patron (except where the articles of management in the school provide otherwise). The board is accountable to the patron and must consult with the patron and keep them informed of board decisions (Department of Education, 2024[2]).

Role of principals

The principal is responsible for the day-to-day management of the school, including providing guidance and direction to the teachers and other staff of the school and is accountable for that management. The principal provides leadership to the teachers, other staff and the students. The principal is also responsible for the creation, together with the school community, of a school environment which is supportive of learning among the students and which promotes the professional development of the teachers (Department of Education, 2024[2]). Principals, deputy principals and teachers are recruited through open competition under the procedures set out in "Circular 0044/2019 Recruitment/Promotion and Leadership For Registered Teachers In Recognised Primary Schools", which are designed to provide fair and impartial procedures for the appointment to posts in recognised primary schools funded by monies provided by the *Oireachtas* (Parliament). A board of management is bound to apply these procedures to ensure openness and transparency in the process of appointment to posts in schools (Department of Education, 2024[2]).

Stakeholder consultation

Ireland has a strong tradition and culture of partnership models and statutory stakeholder engagement in education policy making (OECD, 2023[47]). In line with the Government's aim to prioritise citizen-centric innovation in the public service (OECD, 2020[48]), the DoE regularly engages, at the national level, with representatives of stakeholder bodies, such as the Teaching Council, teacher unions, parent organisations, student groups and councils on specific policy matters, and for shaping and implementing new policy initiatives and reforms. This well-established centralised approach ensures the representativeness of

already identified players in the policy sphere, with structured opportunities to contribute to the dialogue and to the formulation of policy options (OECD, 2023[47]).

The **Education Partners** are the core groups and organisations with whom the DoE consults regarding policy changes or issues of equity and inclusion in primary or post-primary education, including on the DEIS programme. In general, Education Partners have the capacity to show that they have a critical mass to provide a service within the sector. For example, unions, as Education Partners, represent a sufficient number of staff to carry out discussions on behalf of their members (Department of Education, 2024[2]). The representatives from these groups may be consulted or brought together to discuss topics that are relevant to their areas of expertise (Department of Education, 2024[2]). A list of Education Partners is provided in Table 2.1 below.

Table 2.1. List of Education Partners

Name/ acronym	Information	Type
ACCS	Association of Community and Comprehensive Schools	School Management Body representative
Church of Ireland Board of Education	General Synod Board of Education	School Management Body representative
CPSMA	Catholic Primary Schools Management Association	School Management Body representative
Educate Together	Educate Together	School Management Body representative
ETBI	Education and Training Boards Ireland	School Management Body representative
Foras	An Foras Patrúnachta	School Management Body representative
Gaelscoileanna Teo	Gaelscoileanna Teo	School Management Body representative
JMB	Joint Managerial Body	School Management Body representative
MPEB	Muslim Primary Education Board	School Management Body representative
NABMSE	National Association of Boards of Management in Special Education	School Management Body representative
NPC	National Parents Council	Parents representative group
IPPN	Irish Primary Principals Network	Principals professional body representative
NAPD	National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals	Principals professional body representative
ASTI	Association Of Secondary School Teachers Ireland	Teaching staff Union
TUI	Teachers Union Of Ireland	Teaching staff Union
INTO	Irish National Teachers Organisation	Teaching staff Union
Forsa	FORSA	School Completion and EWO union

Source: Department of Education (2024[2]), OECD Review of resourcing schools to address educational disadvantage: Country Background Report Ireland.

The Primary Education Forum, introduced in 2018, supports the planning and sequencing of change in the primary school sector and exchanges information on the intent and impacts of the actions in the Action Plan for Education in order to look for synergies and opportunities for schools to streamline implementation and address workload issues. It facilitates the exchange of information between the DoE, agencies, teachers, principals and managers (Department of Education, 2023[49]; OECD, 2023[47]). The DEIS Advisory Group is made up of representatives from the Education Partners, relevant Government Departments, the ERC, Tusla and DoE officials. The main role of the group is to progress and provide advice on the implementation of the 108 actions in the 2017 DEIS Plan (Department of Education, 2023[50]):

- To progress the implementation of DEIS Plan 2017.
- To provide advice on the implementation of Actions under the Plan in particular:
  o Identify enablers and/or barriers to implementation;
  o Draw attention to difficulties that would be likely to impact implementation or timeline;
  o Seek explanations where implementation is delayed/likely to fail; and
  o Advise on potential solutions for failed/delayed implementation.

Other organisations, who are not Education Partners, may be involved in consultative processes. This may be where the DoE seeks an entity or entities to provide observations on a certain project or may have the expertise required for certain projects. The Social Inclusion Unit team is consulting with principals, teachers, parents and students. The team has also held consultations with HSCL and SCP Coordinators.

Furthermore, the Cineáltas: Action Plan on Bullying was developed following a wide ranging and extensive consultation process with children and young people, parents, school staff, Education Partners and the wider education community (Government of Ireland, 2024[51]).

Another example is the 2022 Review of Out-of-School Education Provision by the Social Inclusion Unit which included public consultations with key stakeholders, such as managers of out-of-school education settings, children and young people with experience of out-of-school education settings (Department of Education, 2022[52]). Public consultations also involved interested parties and stakeholders through a public request for written submissions, and a consultative workshop (ibid.).

Furthermore, in the past, consultation was used on the review of DEIS. More specifically, the DEIS Review Inter-Departmental Group operated in 2015-2016 with the aim to (Department of Education, 2017[53]):

- Review reports from relevant departments and agencies on their current inputs to the DEIS School Support Programme in general, and in the context of evaluations and analysis of such programmes to date including proposals for new or amended inputs;
- Work in tandem with other working groups involved in the review/assessment of measures to combat educational disadvantage and contribute strategic oversight in terms of the alignment of policy development, to ensure a whole-of government approach to supporting DEIS schools and the communities they serve;
- Develop a framework for inter-departmental and inter-agency links with a view to ensuring greater cohesion and cross-sectoral co-operation for future delivery of initiatives catering to those at risk of educational disadvantage; and
- Make recommendations to the DEIS Advisory Group on elements for inclusion in the new School Support Programme.

The consultation was made up of the DoE, the Department of Children, the Department of Social Protection, the Department of Health, and the Department of Housing (Department of Education, 2017[53]). Many of these departments are part of the DEIS Advisory Group.

Strengths

The Department of Education is committed to addressing educational disadvantage through the DEIS programme

Since the 1990s, policy to address educational disadvantage in Ireland has centred on the targeting of additional resources and supports towards schools serving disadvantaged populations. As mentioned previously, educational disadvantage is defined in the Education Act of 1998 as "the impediments to education arising from social or economic disadvantage which prevent students from deriving appropriate benefit from education in schools" (Government of Ireland, 1998[23]).

The DEIS programme was introduced in 2005 to bring together several earlier standalone schemes which addressed specific aspects of educational disadvantage. Examples include the Disadvantaged Areas Scheme, the HSCL Scheme, the Breaking the Cycle scheme, back to school initiative, early school leavers initiative and Giving Children an even break (Weir and Archer, 2004[54]). The rationale for the DEIS approach is the existence of a "multiplier effect", whereby students attending a school with a concentration

of students from disadvantaged backgrounds have poorer academic outcomes, even taking account of individual social background (Smyth, McCoy and Kingston, 2015[55]).

Analysis of the DEIS programme has shown that since the programme has helped to close the gap in achievement between schools serving the highest levels of educational disadvantage and those serving populations with little or no disadvantage (Department of Education, 2024[2]). It has provided children who come to education at a disadvantage with an equitable opportunity to achieve their potential in education (Department of Education, 2024[2]). Studies have noted further benefits including improvements in attendance levels in DEIS Urban Band 1 schools, retention rates, literacy and numeracy levels, and planning for learning, among others (Smyth, McCoy and Kingston, 2015[55]; Department of Education, 2023[56]; ERC, n.d.[57]). The DEIS programme remains the roadmap for addressing educational disadvantage and currently includes 658 primary and 194 post-primary schools. For a more detailed discussion about the evaluation of the DEIS programme, please see Chapter 6.

The commitment to educational disadvantage and DEIS has continued over several decades. For example, the Programme for Government 2020, "Programme for Government – Our Shared Future", sets out the main political priorities concerning the education system, including a commitment to supporting students with special educational needs and those at risk of educational disadvantage. It commits to the implementation of the revised DEIS programme (Government of Ireland, 2020[58]).

The OECD review team heard during the interviews and review visits that the DEIS programme is also widely accepted and supported by stakeholders. It is well regarded for providing support to students at risk of educational disadvantage and for having achieved considerable improvement for these students. This commitment and acceptance of the DEIS framework and in general support for educational disadvantage is key for the continuation of the programme and any further reforms.

The system recognises the importance of stakeholder engagement in education, including for the DEIS programme

Consultation with education stakeholders is an important element of the education system (OECD, 2020[45]). Indeed, one of the central objectives of the Education Act of 1998 is to promote and give statutory recognition to partnership as a principle which underpins the operation of the education system (Houses of Oireachtas, 1998[59]).

The 1998 Act also states that the Minister of Education should establish an "educational disadvantage committee" to advise him/her on policies and strategies to be adopted, and to identify and correct educational disadvantage. This committee should be established following consultations with patrons, national associations of parents, recognised school management organisations, recognised trade unions and staff associations representing teachers (Government of Ireland, 1998[23]). Such an Educational Disadvantage Committee was set up in 2002 and finished its work in 2005 with a concluding report titled "The Moving Beyond Disadvantage" (Education Disadvantage Committee, 2005[60]). While the provision relating to the Educational Disadvantage Committee was repealed by the Education (Amendment) Act 2012, partnerships between stakeholders and departments continue to play an important role in policy making.

The Education Partners are the main groups with whom the DoE consults in regard to policy changes or issues of equity and inclusion in primary and post-primary education (Department of Education, 2024[2]). These include national bodies representing school administrators and patrons, teachers' unions, principals, parents and students, as well as non-governmental advocacy bodies. The DoE involves the Education Partners regularly for gaining from their knowledge and they advise the DoE on any proposed changes (Department of Education, 2024[2]). Education Partners are also represented in the DEIS Advisory Group (described earlier) which meets at least once a year but if other more pressing issues for discussion arise it meets also at other times throughout the year.

In recent years, school-level governance in Ireland has developed a greater diversity of ethos (OECD, 2020[45]). The DoE has consulted children in different strategies, such as the Digital Strategy for Schools and Cineáltas: Action Plan on Bullying. The DoE has established a Student Participation Unit whose remit is to promote the participation of children and young people into the development of department policy (Department of Education, 2024[2]).

The DoE continues to work with Education Partners ensuring that parents, guardians, principals, teachers and others working in schools have the information and resources they need to promote and support well-being and learning for children and young people (Department of Education, 2023[25]). For example, the DoE initiated a review of the DEIS programme in 2015 to develop a new methodology for the identification of schools and a renewed framework of support for schools to address educational disadvantage. The review process was informed by extensive engagement with the Education Partners and other key stakeholders, including workshops with academics and practitioners, to explore the potential for innovation in future interventions in schools which cater for students at highest risk of educational disadvantage and of not reaching their full potential by virtue of their socio-economic circumstances (Department of Education, 2024[2]). The outcome from the review, documented in the "Report on the Review of DEIS" (Department of Education and Skills, 2017[61]), was the publication of the DEIS Plan 2017 (Department of Education, 2021[44]).

Many policy experts regarded government collaboration and consultation with the stakeholders involved as crucial to the successful implementation of policy. A study showed that respondents felt that there was a strong shared commitment to persist and that this was reflected in the absorption of prior policies into larger new ones such as DEIS. This did not only have the benefit of creating greater continuity and ownership over the policies, it also ensured that teachers and parents who had already bought into the prior policies could continue to see the benefits as part of wider policies such as DEIS (Hepworth et al., 2021[62]).

The Department of Education Inspectorate assists in policy making, including in the area of educational disadvantage

In Ireland, there is a long history of evaluating schools and teachers by a centralised Inspectorate, which is a division of the DoE but acts independently (McNamara et al., 2009[63]). This structure can enable building synergies by closely interlinking the work of the Inspectorate with other units in DoE. Inspectors are assigned to work with officials in various sections of the DoE (and the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth), and to assist in policy making and implementation (Hislop, 2017[64]). The Inspectorate is divided into nine business units, which are geographic or thematic in nature (including one focusing on access, inclusion and engagement) (Government of Ireland, n.d.[65]).

Inspections are carried out to bring about improvement in the quality of education provision for children and young people and to support the development of the education system. The Inspectorate does this through providing high-quality evaluation, analysis, support and advice in relation to education provision mainly at early years, primary and post-primary levels. Inspectors also provide advice on a range of education issues to school communities, policy makers in the DoE and to the wider education system (Department of Education, 2024[2]). In addition to promoting improvement, the Inspectorate also fosters accountability in the education system. It does this through quality reporting and assurance, and monitoring of standards, educational opportunities, experiences and issues of educational equity. More information on the Inspectorate and different types of evaluations conducted is provided in Chapter 6.

Additionally, the Inspectorate provides valuable advice to policy makers within the DoE and the broader educational system. Indeed, the Inspectorate operates as a DoE division with the Chief Inspector sitting on the management board. This involvement positions the Inspectorate strategically, allowing for potential synergies by bringing first-hand expertise to inform policy discussions and decisions. To this end, the Inspectorate releases various reports and publications to advise and support schools, policy makers and

the wider educational community (Department of Education, 2023[66]). These publications include national reports covering various aspects of the school system, offering insights and recommendations derived from school evaluations and thematic research. The Inspectorate's involvement supports school self-evaluation and provides resources and guidance for schools to assess and improve their practices (Department of Education, 2022[67]).

The reports also address key areas such as primary education, post-primary education and social inclusion. At the primary level, the Inspectorate focused on, e.g. the implementation and evaluation of the primary school curriculum. At the post-primary level, they addressed modern foreign languages, guidance, ICT, home economics, music, mathematics and others (Department of Education, 2023[66]). Reports relevant to social inclusion include an analysis of stakeholders' perspectives on the summer programme following the COVID-19 pandemic, and evaluations of implementation of DEIS action planning in schools (ibid.). More recent reports focused on the quality of provision for children and young people learning English as an additional language and the quality of provision for children and young people from Ukraine (ibid.). These reports' findings, recommendations and examples of good practice can bring information about the reality of schools and early years' settings into the DoE, and can contribute to the monitoring of the effect of Departmental and other policies on the ground. Indeed, some inspection models, such as the evaluations of DEIS action planning, are designed to monitor specialised provision in schools and to inform policy making (Hislop, 2017[64]).

Furthermore, reports from most recent inspection models are published, which increases transparency, allows stakeholders to read about the evaluation and learn about different practices in schools. Inspection reports can offer a unique insight into the quality of education provided. They are an important information source for the public as the 1998 Education Act precludes the DoE from releasing information on academic performance (Government of Ireland, 1998[23]). Their headline results are featured in the media, employed by schools in marketing to prospective parents and students, and even included in literature by estate agents for those looking to purchase a property (Bokhove, Jerrim and Sims, 2023[68]).

Challenges

Despite recent efforts, there is limited coordination and integration of services across departments to support students at risk of educational disadvantage

Both formal and informal coordination between departments and integration across departmental services are key for education and tackling educational disadvantage. In horizontal coordination, sharing or coordinating responsibilities among government departments or government and non-government actors can have positive impacts for equity and inclusion in education (OECD, 2023[69]). Although evidence is scarce and often focused on early years, the successful integration of services can, for instance, result in more efficient identification of children's needs, including health, well-being, participation, social justice and equality. Services that provide holistic care are also more accessible, more likely to be approached and thus improve the outcomes of those with complex needs (CfBT Education Trust, 2010[70]; Corter, 2021[71]; OECD, 2015[72]; UNESCO, 2020[73]).

The integration of services has also been promoted for its potential in terms of quality and efficiency gains (UNESCO, 2020[73]). If multiple services are provided at single sites, this can lead to reduced costs of travel that is particularly important for disadvantaged groups. Integration can only work in systems where stakeholders are willing to co-operate and coordinate. Efficient co-operation across institutions in a whole-system approach has been recognised as one of the attributes of high performing systems (Burns and Köster, 2016[74]; Schleicher, 2018[75]).

The need to integrate services and coordinate between departments to reflect the multidimensional nature of disadvantage has also been recognised in Ireland and features in the design and objectives of the DEIS

Plans. The 2005 DEIS Action Plan noted that "[t]he education system operates in a context of broader social and economic circumstances. A wide range of issues such as poverty, family breakdown and health problems can adversely affect the learning capacity of pupils. The education system cannot resolve these issues single-handedly, nor can it be expected to, but it must adopt a leading role in influencing interventions that directly impact on the ability of pupils to derive maximum benefit from educational provision" (Department of Education, 2005[76]). In the 2017 DEIS Plan, Goal 4 further states "to support and foster best practice in schools through inter-agency collaboration" (Department of Education, 2021[44]).

The DEIS programme builds on the work of the Education Disadvantage Committee that had been announced in the 1998 Education Act (Government of Ireland, 1998[23]) and set up in 2002 as an expert group functioning on an independent statutory basis, under the leadership of Áine Hyland (Hyland, 2005[77]). Its approach was based on the need for a whole of government approach to the problems of social exclusion involving action by a wide range of departments and agencies. However, the DEIS Plan has been more narrowly focused on the role schools and the DEIS programme can fulfil (Fleming and Harford, 2021[78]).

The DoE has both formal and informal engagement with the Department of Further and Higher Education, Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, and the Department of Social Protection in relation to support students at risk of educational disadvantage within supports provided under the DEIS programme. DoE regularly engages with the relevant areas of those departments in relation to the administration of supports to schools. The DoE also works with the Department of Health, the Department of Justice and other departments on initiatives to address disadvantage for children and young people. When a department is developing or implementing a policy that cuts across other institutions, a steering group/committee is established which includes representation from each department. It can also include representatives from governmental agencies, stakeholder groups and academia. An example is the steering committee on developing an action plan for anti-bullying, established by the Minister of Education in 2022 (Department of Education, 2022[79]).

There is also the DEIS Advisory Group on the implementation of the DEIS programme. As mentioned earlier, the DEIS Advisory Group which is composed of representatives from the Education Partners, relevant government departments, the ERC, Tusla and DoE officials. Its main role is to progress and provide advice on the implementation of the 108 actions in the 2017 DEIS Action Plan (Department of Education, 2023[50]).

Furthermore, government initiatives in recent years such as the introduction of Better Outcome Brighter Futures, the National Policy Framework for Children and Young People, and the establishment of Tusla mean that there is already a policy impetus for cross-departmental and inter-agency working to support children and families, particularly those at risk of poor outcomes in their lives, including education (Department of Education, 2021[44]). Other recent government initiatives focused on supporting children and young people include the Roadmap for Social Inclusion, Anti-Racism Action Plan, Youth Justice Strategy, and Young Ireland: the National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2023-2028 (Department of Education, 2024[2]).

Education policy and the DEIS programme have also featured in the Cabinet Committee on Children and Education (and the previous Committee on Education). Cabinet committees generally make policy recommendations, which are followed up by a formal memo to the government (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2022[80]). The Cabinet Committee on Children and Education was established in the first quarter of 2023 and oversees the implementation of commitments in the Programme for Government in the area of children and education including further and higher education, with a specific focus on child poverty and well-being (Department of Taoiseach, 2023[81]).

The Cabinet Committee on Children and Education of the 33rd Government is composed of Taoiseach; Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Minister for Defence; Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications and Minister for Transport; Minister for Health; Minister for Children, Equality,

Disability, Integration and Youth; Minister for Education; Minister for Public Expenditure, National Development Plan Delivery and Reform; Minister for Finance; Minister for Social Protection and Minister for Rural and Community Development; Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage; and Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Department of the Taoiseach, 2023[82]). The previous Committee on Education has discussed at various times the DEIS programme and allocation to schools, as well as allocation of funds to support special educational needs.

In addition to the Cabinet Committee on Children and Education, there is also a Committee on Education, Further, Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science. This Select Committee comprises only parliamentary members, both from government and opposition. It meets to consider legislation and estimates relating to the DoE and the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Houses of the Oireachtas, 2023[83]). The frequency of cabinet committee meetings varies considerably, potentially affecting their effectiveness, although the quality of engagement within committees is likely a more important factor for successful cross-departmental coordination (Connaughton, 2022[84]). Recent research carried out in the Irish context found that opportunities for discussion can be limited in some committees, with meetings instead serving mainly as conduits for information-sharing (ibid.).

According to the Bertelsmann Foundation's Sustainable Governance Indicators, Ireland ranks below the OECD average on formal inter-ministerial coordination. However, across all policy areas, it ranks above the OECD average on informal inter-ministerial coordination (Figure 2.1) (OECD, 2023[85]).

Figure 2.1. Performance in inter-ministerial coordination in Ireland and selected countries, 2022
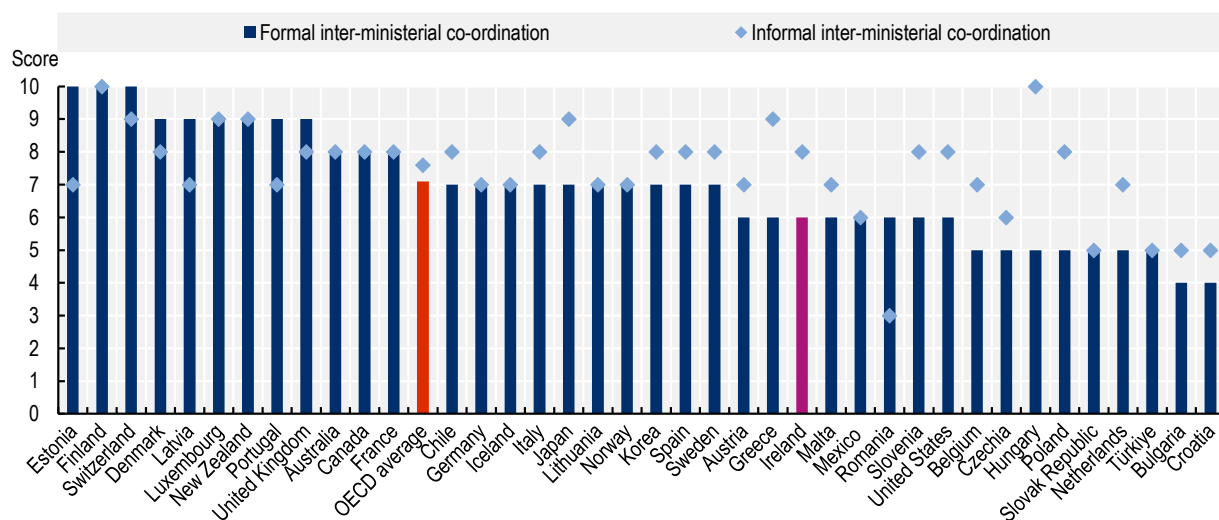
Note: Formal coordination refers to scores that countries are assigned on the question, "How effectively do ministry officials/civil servants co-ordinate policy proposals?" Informal coordination refers to scores that countries are assigned on the question, "How effectively do informal coordination mechanisms complement formal mechanisms of inter-ministerial coordination?" Scores range from 1 to 10. The higher the score, the better the country's performance. Scores are assigned by country and sector experts and reviewed and approved by scholars and practitioners.
Source: Adapted from OECD (2023[85]), OECD Skills Strategy Ireland: Assessment and Recommendations, Figure 5.2, https://doi.org/10.1787/d7b8b40b-en.

The limited formal inter-ministerial coordination might also impact policies to tackle educational disadvantage since a whole of government approach to the problems of exclusion involving action by a wide range of departments and agencies is necessary (Fleming and Harford, 2021[78]). A closer collaboration between departments and agencies is required to achieve different targets, providing

concrete examples of the specific objectives and actions that might be taken to "move beyond educational advantage" (Fleming, Harford and Hyland, 2022[86]; Education Disadvantage Committee, 2005[60]).

Nonetheless, the main policy to address educational disadvantage in Ireland is the DEIS Plan which has involved an DEIS Advisory Group and includes representatives from relevant government departments, Education Partners, the ERC, Tusla and DoE officials.

According to Fleming, Harford and Hyland (2022[86]), the DEIS Plan did not address the lack of integration across government departments. While it has provided to some extent a more integrated approach to the delivery of educational supports for designated schools in disadvantaged areas, fragmentation continued to exist even within services reporting to the DoE. Nonetheless, there have been some efforts to create more integration between services. For example, the National Educational Welfare Board (NEWB) oversaw the HSCL Scheme and the SCP as well as the Educational Welfare Service. The NEWB transferred to Tusla in 2014.

In Ireland, service integration is an important and recurring theme across many government strategies. Yet, evidence suggests that weak service integration continues to undermine day-to-day experiences for children and families (Government of Ireland, 2023[87]). Schools, especially DEIS schools, are on the front line in dealing with students' issues in physical and mental health, housing and poverty, but these issues cannot be solved by teachers and principals alone (Carroll and McCoy, 2021[88]). Despite some recent efforts, the OECD review team heard that principals and other staff members were in many cases required to support parents with the coordination of social and health services and that there is limited coordination of these services with the education sector at the system level. In addition, according to a recent OECD report, children and young people with complex mental and physical health needs continue to face challenges to access appropriate counselling and quality support due to fragmentation in the delivery of services and lack of coordination between relevant departments and agencies (OECD, 2024[89]).

Despite the limited coordination at the national/department level, there are some promising efforts to create greater coordination across departments and services. In particular, the Child Poverty and Well-Being Programme Office was established by the then Taoiseach in spring 2023 to co-ordinate government actions that reduce child poverty and foster children's well-being. Findings from the OECD consistently point to the crucial role that strong political leadership plays in steering cross-cutting priorities (OECD, 2024[89]; OECD, Forthcoming[90]).

The Programme Office is looking at reducing the cost of education for families (such as through free-books scheme, back to school allowance, hot-meals programme, further cutting the cost of childcare, welfare reforms and public health measures, which include well-being and taking part in sport and cultural activities. Furthermore, the Programme Office will focus on consolidating and integrating public health, family and parental assistance, and well-being services so that the needs of all children are met. The government has published the initial Programme Plan: "From Poverty to Potential: A Programme Plan for Child Well-being 2023-2025" (Government of Ireland, 2023[87]). The initial two-and-half year Programme focuses on six areas with the potential to make the most difference to children living in poverty. These are:

- Income support and joblessness;
- Early learning and childcare;
- The cost of education;
- Family homelessness;
- Service integration; and
- Participation in arts, culture and sport.

The Programme Office will monitor and support the implementation of existing and future government strategies under these six areas. It will also undertake projects which amplify the impact of these strategies.

The Child Poverty and Well-being Programme goes in the right direction to coordinate the work of several departments and services.

By listing service integration as priority, the Programme Office recognises that further efforts are needed to enhance a national approach to service integration and the identification of an integrated service model for children and young people (OECD, 2024[89]). However, since it was set up based on the request of former Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar, it raises questions of sustainability of the Programme Office with the change of Taoiseach and after the next parliamentary election in 2025. According to the OECD (2024[89]), policies driven by the centre of government are particularly susceptible to shifts in the political agenda between government terms. It will also be important to evaluate the effectiveness of the Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office in driving government coordination on cross-cutting policy, including across electoral cycles (OECD, 2024[89]).

Sharing of good practices on educational disadvantage exists in the education system and among schools, but could be further promoted

The OECD review team has witnessed and heard about many promising practices for supporting students at risk of educational disadvantage in the education system, both in DEIS and non-DEIS schools. Sharing of good practices takes place in various ways, for example through DoE, the Inspectorate and *Oide*.

For instance, the DoE has organised some learning days to share good practices. The theme of the initial event was Adapting and Managing Successful Transitions which is an essential element of Goal 2 of the DEIS Plan, to improve the learning experience and outcomes of students in DEIS schools and which had been identified as a critical need at the time. After the webinar, there was further discussion around the feedback received. Literacy and Numeracy were topics that have repeatedly been discussed. These webinars took place approximately one year apart. In the future, learning days might be run by the *Oide* team (Government of Ireland, 2023[91]).

In addition, the Inspectorate collects and describes promising practices and programmes in its published reports of inspected schools (Government of Ireland, n.d.[92]) as well as more thematic reports, including on main inspection findings from DEIS schools (e.g. Department of Education (2022[93])). These reports constitute a considerable knowledge base. For instance, the Inspectorate has provided online webinars to schools through the Education Support Centre networks, the ETB structures and to a variety of patron bodies; the presentations are then provided to the Education Support Centres/ETB and the patron bodies for dissemination. For example, presentations cover findings from the "Looking at DEIS Action Planning for Improvement in Primary and Post-Primary Schools" publication (Department of Education, 2022[93]). The Inspectorate also shares good practices about DEIS through numerous presentations given to Trustee bodies and ETBs, and works closely with Education Support Centres.

Furthermore, the Inspectorate published a good practice guide titled "Effective literacy and numeracy practices in DEIS schools" that is intended to support the sharing of good practice among schools and teachers (Inspectorate, 2009[94]). It describes a range of approaches that teachers and DEIS school communities have taken to the teaching of literacy and numeracy in eight schools designated as serving areas of considerable socio-economic disadvantage.

The Inspectorate also rolled out a formal programme to all schools new to DEIS 2017 to support them through DEIS planning and share examples of good practice. The DEIS School Support Programme is aimed at supporting schools in delivering literacy and numeracy programmes and providing additional core funding to schools with higher levels of disadvantage (Department of Education, 2021[44]). One of the key features of this programme is the allocation of resources to enable smaller class sizes for junior students in the most disadvantaged schools. Examples of practices include the provision of a career guidance counsellor to all schools in the support programme. Another is a Book Rental Scheme, which became mandatory for schools in the support programme from 2017 (Department of Education, 2021[44]).

Besides the DoE and the Inspectorate, *Oide* represents an educational support system for schools. Its purpose is to support the professional learning of teachers and principals (Oide, 2024[95]). There are *Oide* DEIS primary and post-primary teams, which are dedicated to supporting DEIS schools. In spring 2024, the DEIS post-primary team has been facilitating a series of seminars and workshops to support DEIS schools to create SMART targets in DEIS action planning. This included in-person school visits where schools could have checked their data and target progress with the *Oide* support team (Department of Education, 2024[2]).

Overall, sharing of good practices and greater collaboration among schools are important. Research evidence shows the potential of promoting collaboration with other schools as it benefits peer learning, the sharing of resources and school improvement efforts more generally (OECD, 2016[96]). Some initiatives are already taking place in Ireland (e.g. through the Step-Up Initiative, Creative Clusters and Creative Schools, Schools Excellence Fund, the Small Schools action research project and the NCCA school networks). Digital technologies are also facilitating collaborations (OECD, 2023[47]).

Moreover, the 2017 DEIS Plan specified that for the School Excellence Fund[1], schools were encouraged to use existing networks or to create new networks, with a particular focus on linking with schools with a track record of excellence, on establishing links between primary and post-primary schools, and where appropriate, including partnerships with third-level specialists in education, and relevant industry or community groups. Examples of networking initiatives included (Department of Education, 2021[44]):

- Clusters of schools working collaboratively as project partners to identify particular problems and challenges; and
- Working collaboratively to identify solutions to the problems, taking account of the best assessment practices and the best teaching practices.

Other new initiatives also encourage collaboration. For instance, the guidelines on the appropriate use of the Attendance Campaign Support Grant for Primary and Post-Primary Schools (Department of Education, 2023[97]) encourages collaboration/clustering between schools. Schools are encouraged to cluster locally and work together to gain maximum benefit from the grant. This can involve, for example, ECEC settings, primary and post-primary schools in a locality working together. Collaboration among schools can facilitate the development of impactful initiatives that address issues relating to attendance especially among children and young people at risk of educational disadvantage. It can also help build relationships which may ease the transition from ECEC settings to primary schools and from primary to post-primary schools (Department of Education, 2023[97]).

Another initiative of school-to-school collaboration is Creative Schools.[2] This is a flagship of the Creative Youth plan – led by the Arts Council in partnership with the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sports and Media, DoE, and the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth. Since its inception in 2018, 462 schools including primary, post-primary, DEIS and special schools have joined the initiative (Creative Ireland, n.d.[98]). Furthermore, there are a number of DEIS Communities of Practice through the education centres for teachers and school leaders (see Chapter 4 for more details). This is a network of schools that share a common goal of improving educational outcomes for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Through this community, schools can work together to share good practices, collaborate on projects, forge links with primary schools and access professional development opportunities (Clare Education Support Centre, 2024[99]).

Despite some existing initiatives, a recent OECD report states that there is considerable scope for strengthening school-to-school collaborations and networking in the education system (OECD, 2023[47]). Reasons include the school funding model that depends on student enrolments and is believed to encourage competition, rather than collaboration between schools (OECD, 2020[100]; OECD, 2017[101]). In addition, collaborations tend to be more project-focused rather than systemic and do not necessarily

provide scope for broader relationship building and collaborative professional development (OECD, 2023[47]).

The OECD review team heard during interviews and school visits that sharing of good practices to support students at risk of educational disadvantage often takes place through informal exchanges between schools. The OECD team also gained the impression that not all schools were aware of all the guidance material and tools for DEIS support available on various sites and links, and thus often relied on exchanging about practices with other schools. While there are several resources and sharing of good practices available to DEIS schools, non-DEIS schools could benefit from a further systematic sharing of practices on how to support students at risk of educational disadvantage.

Policy recommendations

Strengthen the coordination and integration of services across departments to better support students at risk of educational disadvantage

Effective coordination across government departments, agencies, service providers, and the community and voluntary sector is crucial, given that children and young people have specific needs spanning all policy and service areas such as education, employment, health, housing, justice, civic and political participation, gender equality and environment. Moreover, outcomes in different policy areas can impact each other. Breaking down silos to promote whole-of-government and whole-of-society approaches to improving policy outcomes for children and youth is, therefore, critical (OECD, 2024[89]).

A cross-sectoral strategy is defined as a framework that covers all relevant policy and service areas, based on effective coordination mechanisms among different ministries, across different levels of government, and with the participation of public bodies responsible for, and working on, issues affecting children and young people (OECD, 2020[102]).

In the area of educational disadvantage, it is especially important to promote coordination, co-operation and collaboration across the whole of government (OECD, 2019[103]). A whole-of-government approach aims to improve the horizontal and vertical coordination of government activity in order to improve policy coherence and the use of resources (OECD, 2011[104]). Coordination across different ministries and levels of government does not imply a centralised "one-size-fits-all" steering model, as coordination within a whole-of-government approach should be flexible enough to take into account particular regional or sectoral needs. However, individual ministries or agencies should not pursue their own policies without coordinating with other relevant ministries or agencies as appropriate (OECD, 2019[103]).

Interagency co-operation can occur at the level of planning and/or service delivery. It can be limited to information and knowledge exchange or involve "joined up working", including sharing of staff and financial resources (OECD, 2024[89]). However, countries often face practical challenges to collaborate across sectors, and to deliver holistic approaches (OECD, 2020[102]).

In Ireland, the government engages in some coordination and collaboration to meet the needs of students and communities at risk of educational disadvantage. For example, the DoE, the Department of Social Protection and the Department of Children exchange on policies and are involved in contributing to the service provision of the DEIS programme. The DoE also co-ordinates with the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, and Department of Further and Higher Education on early years education as well as further and higher education, respectively. However, it would be important to further strengthen coordination across these departments and units so that policy for education in early years education aligns with that for primary and post-primary and in turn aligns with policy for higher and further education. New policy developments are going in this direction with the announcement of an Equal Start programme (a DEIS-type system for ECCE) (Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and

Youth, 2024[39]), which could create smoother transitions into the DEIS programme at primary and post-primary levels.

The Cabinet Committee on Children and Education oversees the implementation of commitments in the Programme for Government commitments in the area of children and education including further and higher education, with a specific focus on child poverty and well-being. Furthermore, the Child Well-being and Poverty Programme in the Department of Taoiseach seeks to co-ordinate government actions to facilitate service provision in the area of well-being and poverty.

These are all promising developments which need to be sustained and strengthened to support students at risk of educational disadvantage and their families with a holistic service provision. There is still limited integration of services at the national and local levels. In Ireland, some extended schools can fill the role of an integrated service provider by supporting students and their families with learning, but also physical and mental health, housing and employment needs (see Chapter 5). However, it is often due to the initiative of the principal and staff, and co-operation with community stakeholders and service providers.

Therefore, it is important to strengthen the integration of services across departments so that students at risk of educational disadvantage are supported in their learning, social and emotional needs. This requires the DoE and its related agencies to work closely with other relevant departments and service providers, and establish cross-sectoral co-operation in regard to health and welfare issues in education (Downes, Nairz-Wirth and Rusinaitė, 2017[105]). Furthermore, "a committed participation of, and long-term co-operation between, stakeholders from all relevant areas (notably education and training, employment, economic affairs, social affairs, health, housing, youth, culture and sport)" would also be beneficial (EU Council, 2015, p. 10[106]; Downes, Nairz-Wirth and Rusinaitė, 2017[105]).

There are several advantages of more integrated models of service delivery including an increased co-operation and collaboration between providers and agencies, improvements in service quality, and better outcomes and satisfaction with service delivery among service users and providers (OECD, 2015[107]). Nevertheless, an integrated approach across departments requires dedicated staff, a shared outcomes framework, shared data collection and monitoring and shared funding allocations (UK Parliament, 2021[108]; Patana, 2020[109]). Ireland could draw on the experience and examples from other countries regarding whole of government approaches and integrated services (Box 2.1).

Box 2.1. Whole of government approaches and integrated services

Germany has an interesting example of a whole of government approach in skills policy. An Alliance for Initial and Further Training was established in 2014. The Alliance encompasses a wide range of stakeholders, effectively bringing together different government departments (education, business and labour), levels of government and stakeholders. It combines annual plenary meetings involving the top political levels with more regular meetings of working groups at the lower level. Furthermore, the Alliance agreement contains a significantly higher degree of detail regarding specific policy instruments and issues to be further discussed. Even though Germany has a long tradition of collective decision making in skills policy, the Alliance brings added value by effectively pursuing a whole of government approach in promoting collaboration between stakeholders (OECD, 2020[110]).

Many countries have also recognised the potential of providing co-located multidisciplinary early years support by establishing initiatives that specifically target children at risk of exclusion or disadvantage. The Sure Start Programme in the United Kingdom, for example, was developed to provide education, social and health services to young children and their families, with a special (initial) focus in locally and socially deprived areas (Patana, 2020[109]). Aiming to prevent the intergenerational transmission of disadvantage and to improve children's cognitional and language development, educational outcomes, and other forms of disadvantage, the Sure Start Programme offers a range of (either co- or closely

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located) services to children below five and their families. Sure Start programmes also provide home-based services both for outreach purposes and to provide holistic support in children's and their families' living environment (Bate and Foster, 2017[111]). While initially targeting disadvantaged populations, the programme has expanded to reach a larger number of families beyond the most disadvantaged areas since its inception in 1998.

A national longitudinal study of the Sure Start shows that the programme has had significant positive effects, both in terms of outcomes (Melhuish, Belsky and Barnes, 2018[112]) as well as cost-effectiveness (Cattan et al., 2019[113]). Similar initiatives targeting disadvantaged children have also been implemented in several other countries, such as Australia (Children's Contact Services), Hungary (Sure Start), Korea (Dream Start), and the United States (Early Head Start and Head Start) (Patana, 2020[109]). Similar services also exist for youth in Finland (*Ohjaamo*), France (*Missions Locales*), New Zealand (Youth Service) and the United Kingdom (Connexions) (OECD, 2019[114]; OECD, 2014[115]).

Promote further the sharing of good practices in the education system and across schools in the area of educational disadvantage

In Ireland, there are many good practices in its education system and across schools on how to support students at risk of educational disadvantage. As described previously, sharing of good practices takes place at the central and local levels through the DoE, the Inspectorate and *Oide* (see also Chapter 4). At the national level, the DoE organises learning days, as mentioned earlier. In addition, DEIS Communities of Practice in education centres take place. The Inspectorate collaborates with other DoE support services to share evidence-based practices with teachers and schools.

Sharing of good practices takes place particularly through the Inspectorate that inspects many schools across the country and identifies good practices. In general, external school evaluation through the Inspectorate can lead to recommendations or instructions on particular aspects for individual schools to improve and can be used to identify and share best practice and innovative practice throughout the education system (OECD, 2013[116]). One of the Inspectorate's tasks is to "promote best practice and school improvement by advising teachers, principals and boards of management in schools" (Department of Education, 2023[35]). Similarly, in countries such as Portugal, a central role for the Inspectorate is to identify good practices that need to be generalised to the whole system, while keeping in mind the need for diverse approaches depending on the school context (OECD, 2022[117]).

In Ireland, the Inspectorate plays an important role as an intermediate support structure connecting central authorities to schools. This takes place, for example, through the Inspectorate's publications on DEIS and also a newsletter for schools on school self-evaluation which has featured DEIS practices (Department of Education, 2024[118]). More specifically, there has been a number of composite reports on DEIS schools (see Chapter 6), sessions for DEIS schools and advisory visits provided by the Inspectorate for school self-evaluation (SSE) in DEIS schools. SSE is aligned with DEIS action planning process in the Next Steps SSE circular (Department of Education, 2022[67]). Inspectors share good practices when they evaluate and advise a school. The wealth of knowledge that the Inspectorate has built up about good practice is used to inform recommendations, and is central to the feedback discussions inspectors have with individual teachers and schools. This sharing of good practice is central to school and system improvement (Department of Education, 2024[2]). However, different types of school inspections (including the Evaluation of action planning for improvement for DEIS) take place on regular basis (frequency and duration vary according to different factors, see Chapter 6), so there is a need to share good practices between inspections through other tools and communication material.

In addition to the sharing of good practices through the Inspectorate, there are some Communities of Practice in Ireland, established through the Education Support Centre network, and overseen by *Oide*

(described in Chapter 4). A number of DEIS schools also take part in the change-maker schools network (a partnership between Dublin City University and schools) that work together for school improvement. The schools work as a professional learning community, and share good practices in terms of teaching and learning (Dublin City University, n.d.[119]). The OECD review team also heard that many practices are shared through the initiative of principals and teachers.

However, the team gained the impression that some schools were not aware of all the available guidance material and tools for DEIS support and where to find it, and often relied on exchanging about practices with other schools. Ireland could thus further promote available tools and share good practices in the system and across schools on supporting students at risk of educational disadvantage, in both DEIS and non-DEIS schools. In Ireland, there are several resources and tools in reports, websites, presentations and webinars that contain tools and good practices. However, as there are many venues with information, schools might not always be aware where to search for them. It could be useful to collect all information in one place (e.g. a website), where users can search for good practices and find guidance. Both DEIS and non-DEIS schools could benefit from this resource.

More specifically, establishing an online repository of good practices in the education system might be helpful where schools and other stakeholders can search for relevant practice examples in the area of educational disadvantage. These could include different themes/categories that users could search for. For example, there are European online repositories of good practices in the area of early school leaving titled ESL Plus and in the area of adult learning called REGALE (Regional capacity for adult learning and education) (Box 2.2).

> ### Box 2.2. European online repositories of good practice
>
> **European ESL-platform and support services (ESLplus)**
>
> The ESLplus project aims to reduce disparities in learning outcomes affecting learners from disadvantaged backgrounds. To this end, it has systematically collected, analysed and shared knowledge, practices and applications related to the topic of early school leaving at a European level. The online portal (ESLplus Portal) was set up for knowledge sharing to enable policy makers, educational institutions, principals, teachers and parents to identify and reduce early school leaving. The ESLplus website includes, among five good practices listed for Ireland, two relevant ones: about the DEIS initiative and the Limerick DEIS primary school literacy programme.
>
> **REGALE online repository**
>
> The repository of relevant practices is a collection of successful adult education practices and policies at the local, regional and national levels. The deliverable includes more than 50 successful projects, initiatives and policies from all over Europe.
>
> The repository is an online tool allowing readers to find projects, initiatives and policies according to keywords representing the main challenge, target group(s) and themes. For instance, keywords include disadvantaged groups of learners, migration and integration, and inclusion. A detailed description approved by the project/initiative designers and implementers is available for each practice.
>
> Source: ESLplus (n.d.[120]), Good practice repository, https://eslplus.eu/good-practice-repository (accessed on 4 January 2024); and REGALE (n.d.[121]), Repository of good practice, https://regalenetwork.eu/repository/#https://regalenetwork.eu/repository/# (accessed on 4 January 2024).

The OECD review team has heard that Ireland is already taking steps in this direction by developing a depository of tools on DEIS and social inclusion on the website of *Oide* (Oide, n.d.[122]). These can become important resources for teachers and school staff.

In addition, there is already an *Oide* English as an Additional Language padlet (a type web page which is easy to update) which is open to public and provides support for schools (Oide, n.d.[123]). It includes links to documents and reports by a range of sources such as Professional Development Service for Teachers and National Council for Curriculum Assessment on topics such as Supporting Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Learners, a Toolkit for Diversity in Primary School, and DEIS Planning Intercultural Events in Schools and Colleges (ibid.). These can provide guidance for developing an inclusive school environment. It will be helpful to promote such developed tools to ensure that all schools are aware of them and know how to use them.

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Notes

[1] 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 (Department of Education, 2022[13]). The SEF finished in 2021.

[2] Creative Schools aim to give children and young people the opportunity to experience creativity as an integral part of their education placing the arts and creativity at the centre of school life. The initiative recognises that schools play an important role in providing opportunities for children to participate in arts and culture, and doing so also develop socio-emotional well-being, cognitive development and positive attitudes towards school.

3 Resourcing schools to address educational disadvantage

Recent years have witnessed a remarkable increase in educational investment in Ireland and DEIS has followed this trend. The most salient characteristics of DEIS are its focus on concentrations of disadvantage, and the earmarked allocation of additional resources, which may explain its efficiency given its relatively modest share in the overall budget for education. Potential areas for improvement include the further fine-tuning of the indicator(s) used to measure disadvantage and the revision of the algorithm for the classification of schools into different DEIS categories. The possibilities for additional support for the most disadvantaged schools as well as disadvantaged students outside DEIS schools are explored, and the question of the responsiveness of the scheme to evolving needs is discussed.

Context and features

This section examines the volume as well as the allocation mechanisms of the Delivering Equality of Opportunity In Schools (DEIS) Programme, including both financial contributions and non-monetary supports. It starts with an overview of the baseline funding[1] of primary and post-primary education in Ireland, as the background against which DEIS has developed. Then, it analyses the different components of DEIS and the rules for allocation of additional resources to schools.

Overall picture of education funding in Ireland

The Irish education budget has experienced some fluctuations in the past decades. Figure 3.1 shows the fluctuation of overall expenditure per student for primary, secondary (post-primary) and post-secondary non-tertiary education in particular, in Ireland compared to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) average over the past 30 years. After being below average for more than a decade, expenditure per student peaked in 2007 at more than 20% above the OECD average. This peak was short-lived due to cutbacks following the financial crisis of 2008-2010. Since 2016, Ireland is catching up again, with a remaining gap of six percentage points in 2020 (the latest available year for comparison).

Figure 3.1. Trends in total expenditure per student in primary, secondary (post-primary) and post-secondary non-tertiary education

Index in PPP (purchasing power parity) dollars – OECD 2010 = 100
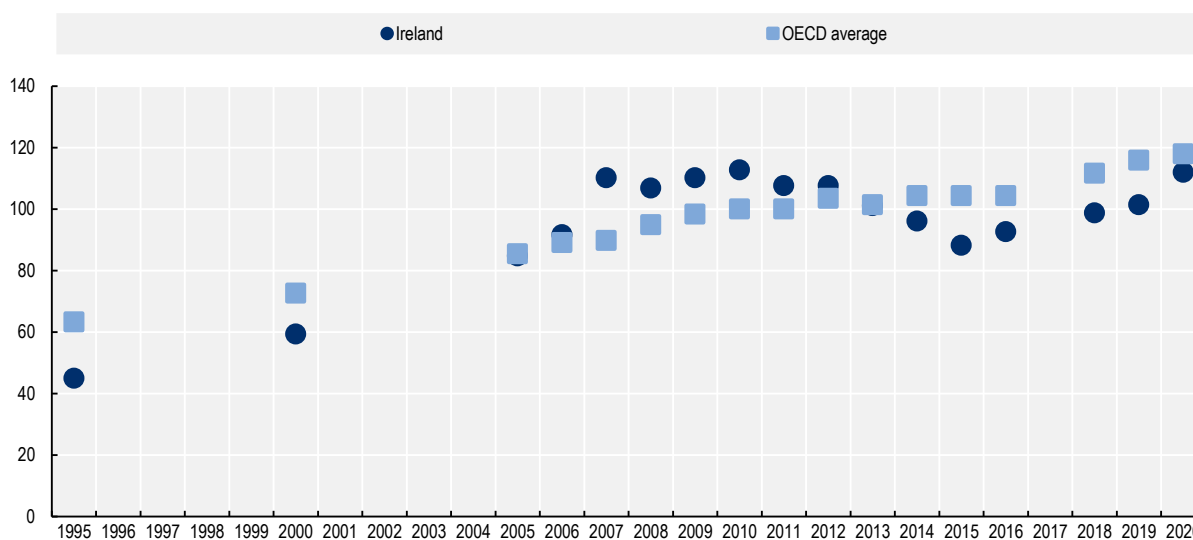
Source: Calculations based on OECD (2005[1]), Education at a Glance 2005: OECD Indicators, Table B1.4, https://doi.org/10.1787/eag-2005-en; OECD (2008[2]), Education at a Glance 2008: OECD Indicators, Table B1.5, https://doi.org/10.1787/eag-2008-en; OECD (2012[3]), Education at a Glance 2012: OECD Indicators, Table B1.5, https://doi.org/10.1787/eag-2012-en; OECD (2016[4]), Education at a Glance 2016: OECD Indicators, Table B1.5, https://doi.org/10.1787/eag-2016-en; OECD (2017[5]), Education at a Glance 2017: OECD Indicators, Table B1.3 and Table C1.3; and OECD (2023[6]), Education at a Glance 2023: OECD Indicators, Table C2.2, https://doi.org/10.1787/e13bef63-en.

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Table 3.1 compares the spending on education in Ireland in 2020 as a percentage of gross domestic product (GDP) and expressed in absolute terms per student. Considering only government funding, the proportion of GDP spent on education in Ireland was 2.7%, against 4.3% on average across OECD

countries. However, considering the expense as a share of GDP distorts the comparison because, in the Irish case, GDP figures are inflated by the presence of multinational firms (OECD, 2022[7]). As explained in Chapter 1, the Modified Gross National Income (GNI*)[2] provides a measure of the size of the Irish economy specifically adjusted to lessen the impact of globalisation activities that disproportionately affect Irish economic aggregates. Education expenditure as a percentage of GNI* stood at 5.3% in 2019 and 5.8% in 2015 (Department of Education, n.d.[8]).

The absolute level of Irish expenditure per student in 2020 lied approximately 10% below the OECD average for primary education in 2020, and the corresponding ratios for secondary and tertiary were approximately 5%. Given that there are strong economies of scale in schools and that the average size of primary schools in particular is very small in Ireland (see Chapter 1), one can expect that schools still experience some financial stress despite the budgetary efforts since 2016.

Table 3.1. Expenditure on education

USD (United States Dollar) equivalent PPP, 2020

		Ireland	OECD average
Education expenditure as % of GDP	Total expenditure	3.2	5.1
	Government expenditure	2.7	4.3
Education expenditure as % of total government expenditure		10.8	9.2
Total expenditure per student	Primary	9 589	10 658
	Secondary	11 379	11 942
	Tertiary	17 400	18 105

Source: OECD (2023[6]), Education at a Glance 2023: OECD Indicators, Table C1.1., Table C2.3, Table C2.3 and Table C4.1., https://doi.org/10.1787/e13bef63-en.

Between 2020 and 2024, the Irish government has enhanced the education budget by 20.2%, mainly as a response to the energy crisis and increased inflation (Department of Education, 2023[9]). However, a large part of this increase was announced as a one-off support (e.g. for COVID-19 pandemic supports and increased cost of living). It is yet unclear to what extent the "permanent" increase has outweighed rising costs and how it will impact the real spending per student at primary and secondary (post-primary) levels.

The relatively economical public funding in the past may explain why, until today, schools have recurred to private fundraising activities. The quest for voluntary contributions from parents is still a common practice in Irish schools for certain items and services. Despite recent legal and budgetary measures to reduce the pressure that is sometimes exerted on parents, the debate on free access to primary and post-primary education remains open (see Chapter 5).

Patterns of "baseline" school funding in Ireland

Before diving into the specificities of DEIS, it is worth summarising the main baseline funding mechanisms that are used to transfer resources to schools, irrespective of the social composition of their student population. A rough distinction can be made between capital expenditure, personnel and operating costs.

- **Capital investments** (in school buildings) are carried out in programmes that are based on discretionary administrative decisions: this means that, among the schools applying for such funding, priorities are set according to their needs but also to available budgets and policy priorities rather than based on fixed formulas. In 2023, over 300 building projects were under construction, including new buildings as well as extensions or renovations of existing buildings (Department of Education, 2024[10]). Altogether, these capital investments account for approximately 9% of the overall budget devoted to primary, post-primary and post-secondary non-tertiary education

(Department of Public Expenditure, NDP Delivery and Reform and Department of Finance, 2022[11]; 2023[12]).

- **Personnel costs** (including pensions) make up 80% of the education budget (Department of Public Expenditure, NDP Delivery and Reform and Department of Finance, 2022[11]; 2023[12]). This category comprises teaching and non-teaching staff. Teaching staff are allocated to schools in terms of "teacher-hours" based on formulas that take into account the level (primary, post-primary), type (mainstream, special) and track (at post-primary level) of education as well as the number of students enrolled in each segment. Salaries are paid directly by the Department of Education (DoE) in order to iron out differences in pay related to qualifications and seniority across teachers and schools. Non-teaching staff include administrative personnel, special needs assistants for students with special educational needs and other non-teaching staff. More than 40 000 special needs teachers and special needs assistants are engaged to cater for students with special educational needs – as far as possible, in inclusive settings (Department of Education, 2024[10]).

- Finally, **operating expenses** of schools are covered by a package of (cash) grants, of which the capitation grant is the most important one. As the term suggests, a fixed amount "per capita" (per student) is transferred to each school[3]. Enhanced capitation rates apply for students with special educational needs, and Traveller and Roma students. In addition, "earmarked" grants are provided for specific ancillary services, textbooks and other specific programmes (Department of Education, 2024[10]). The share of operating expenses in the overall budget for education is approximately 11% (Department of Public Expenditure, NDP Delivery and Reform and Department of Finance, 2022[11]; Department of Public Expenditure, NDP Delivery and Reform and Department of Finance, 2023[12]).

DEIS programme

The Delivering Equality of Opportunity In Schools (DEIS) programme is the Irish version of an equity funding strategy, i.e. a programme providing additional resourcing to schools that cater for a large proportion of socially disadvantaged students, with the aim of overcoming economic, social and cultural obstacles in their school careers, and equalising educational opportunities. Two-thirds of all European countries or regions have equity funding schemes in education (European Executive Agency for Education and Culture, Eurydice and Parveva, 2017[13]). In this section, the main features of the DEIS programme will be analysed through the lens of a theoretical-normative framework derived from the literature on equity funding systems (Demeuse et al., 2008[14]; Nicaise, Vandevoort and Verelst, 2024[15]). For the sake of simplicity, the analysis will focus on the present version of the DEIS programme (see Chapter 1 for an overview).

Objectives

As was mentioned in Chapter 1, the general ambition of the programme is to overcome "the impediments to education arising from social or economic disadvantage which prevent students from deriving appropriate benefit from education in schools" (Government of Ireland, 1998[16]). This corresponds to the mainstream definition of educational equity funding, pointing at socio-economic background as the main undesired determinant of inequalities in educational outcomes. In present-day OECD societies, the notion of "social disadvantage" is often extended to include socio-cultural obstacles that can be related to ethnic minority or immigrant background, which in the Irish case refers to Traveller and Roma communities as well as the growing (yet diverse) immigrant population.

The declared objectives in the first official documents – including the statement that "all students should have the opportunity to reach their potential" (Department of Education, 2024, p. 39[10]) – remained rather vague, as the term "potential" was not specified and is controversial in the scientific literature.[4] However, the DEIS Plan 2017 adopted a comprehensive and ambitious set of quantitative targets in terms of (1)

raising the proportion of students attaining minimum standards of literacy and numeracy, (2) narrowing the gaps between disadvantaged and other schools in terms of cognitive achievement, school career transitions (retention rates, progression into further and higher education) and well-being, and (3) teacher education, parental engagement and community links (Department of Education, 2017[17]).

Targeting educationally disadvantaged students

While it may seem intuitive to delineate the target group for equity funding as schools facing challenges in educational outcomes, such as low academic performance or high rates of repetition or dropout, providing supplementary resources to schools based solely on these criteria could yield unintended consequences. These consequences might include discouraging or penalising initiatives aimed at mitigating failure. Furthermore, additional funding directed towards improving outcomes may inadvertently lead to selective enrolment practices or incentivise schools to exclude their most academically challenged students (Hanushek, 1981[18]). To avoid such adverse effects, it is important to link the additional support to *exogenous* variables, i.e. student characteristics beyond the control of the school that are, nevertheless, strong predictors of poor educational outcomes. Socio-economic, ethnic and immigrant backgrounds are such exogenous characteristics (Box 3.1), and, as such, target schools in the DEIS programme have been identified on the basis of the social background of students. Social background characteristics are not only good predictors of educational disadvantage but also relatively stable across the school career and observable from a very early age, as social background mainly refers to the social position of parents. This has two further implications: firstly, preventive strategies can be implemented for socially disadvantaged children from early childhood onwards. Early intervention may avoid the accumulation of learning deficits and is, therefore, deemed more effective than remediation at later ages. Secondly, interventions targeting disparities in opportunities associated with social background, irrespective of actual achievement, will also benefit advantaged children. Indeed, from an "equal opportunities" perspective, these students also deserve additional support because it may further boost their chances to excel.

> **Box 3.1. Indicators of socio-economic background at individual and school level: lessons from other countries**
>
> Until 2017, **England** (United Kingdom) used eligibility for free school meals, along with a few other individual characteristics, as a proxy for disadvantage. The free meals indicator was abandoned when the National Audit Office found a significant proportion of non-take up, due to a range of motives, including stigma. The indicator was then replaced with eligibility for Universal Credit, a social protection scheme that assigns rights based on more reliable national register data.
>
> In the **Netherlands**, individual student characteristics (parents' level of education, mother's country of birth, duration of residence in the country, postcode and entitlement to school grants) are collected into a central database administered by the Central Bureau of Statistics. Weights are assigned to all characteristics. Moreover, the overall weight at school level is multiplied with a coefficient for schools operating in concentration areas.
>
> The **Flemish Community of Belgium** adopts a similar method. Most information is available from administrative register data, such as the mother's level of education (registered by the Ministry of Education for all mothers who completed their education in Belgium) and the school grants (automatically assigned based on tax declarations). For recent immigrants, this is combined with self-declared information on the mother's education level and home language (registered at first enrolment). For secondary schools with a concentration of disadvantaged students (higher than 55%), the overall weight is multiplied by 1.5. An additional concentration multiplier of 1.11 is applied to schools in the Brussels Capital Region.
>
> Source: Nicaise, Vandevoort and Verelst (2024[15]), "The effectiveness of equity funding of schools: a comparative analysis of Flanders, The Netherlands, France, Ireland and England" in *The Routledge International Handbook of Equity and Inclusion in Education*, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003282921.

In the Irish case, the key indicator used is the Pobal Haase Pratschke Index (HP Index), described in Chapter 1. The HP Index is measured at individual level for all students in a school, based on their home address, but actually reflects the "socio-economic capital" of their neighbourhood rather than their *own* social background. More precisely, an average value is measured for all households in a Small Area[5] in which they live, based on a principal component analysis of data drawn from the population census, resulting in three components: demographic profile, social class composition and labour market situation (see Chapter 1 for more details). Using the Small Area averages from the census for each characteristic has the advantage that there are no gaps in the data, no administrative burden is imposed on schools for data collection purposes, and no intrusive questionnaires need to be filled upon registration in schools.

As was explained in Chapter 1, HP Index scores are standardised with a mean value of zero and a threshold of -10 points, equivalent to one standard deviation below the mean. Students within each school are identified as disadvantaged if their HP Index score is in the "bottom tail of the distribution", more precisely at least 10 points below the population average. They receive a double weight if their index value is more than 20 points (or two standard deviations) below that average. "Borderline disadvantaged" students, with HP Index values between -7.5 and -10, are given a weight of 0.5; while all students above the -7.5 threshold get zero weight. Further corrections are made to include students self-identified as belonging to Traveller and Roma communities, and those residing in State-funded emergency homeless accommodation, in an International Protection Accommodation Service (IPAS) setting and Emergency Reception and Orientation Centre (EROC).

Next, the average weight at the school level is calculated. Schools are eligible for DEIS support either if their average student weight exceeds a given threshold, or if the proportion of students with an HP Index score at or below -10 exceeds a given threshold.

In the case of primary schools, the location of a school also plays a role: a distinction is made between urban and rural settings; within urban settings the most disadvantaged schools are labelled Urban Band 1 while other eligible schools are labelled Urban Band 2. Altogether (including the non-eligible schools), this makes four levels of support. At post-primary level, no distinction is made between urban bands and rural areas, resulting in a binary distinction between DEIS and non-DEIS.[6]

Concentration and coverage

The potential impact of equity funding on the target group depends on a combination of parameters such as (a) the share of the education budget spent on (additional) equity funding, (b) the relative size of the target group (expressed as a percentage of the corresponding school population), and (c) the absolute volume of the education budget. For any given volume of investment in equity funding, the potential impact of the additional resourcing at student level is inversely proportional with the size of the target population. Box 3.2 illustrates the argument with some comparative figures for five European education systems.

Box 3.2. Measures of financial impact of equity funding in five European education systems

Figure 3.2 shows that the quantitative coverage of equity resourcing varies between countries (e.g. 10% of the overall student population in the Netherlands versus 49% in the Flemish Community of Belgium).[7] The desirability of a wide or narrow targeting remains a topic for debate. A narrower definition of the target population allows for more concentrated funding, with potentially more powerful effects on students' outcomes. In contrast, proponents of a wide coverage argue that stigmatisation of target schools should be avoided, that equal educational opportunities are a remit for every school, and that even limited extra resources may encourage more "mixed schools" to put equity higher on their agenda.

Figure 3.2. Key parameters of financial impact of equity funding in selected systems
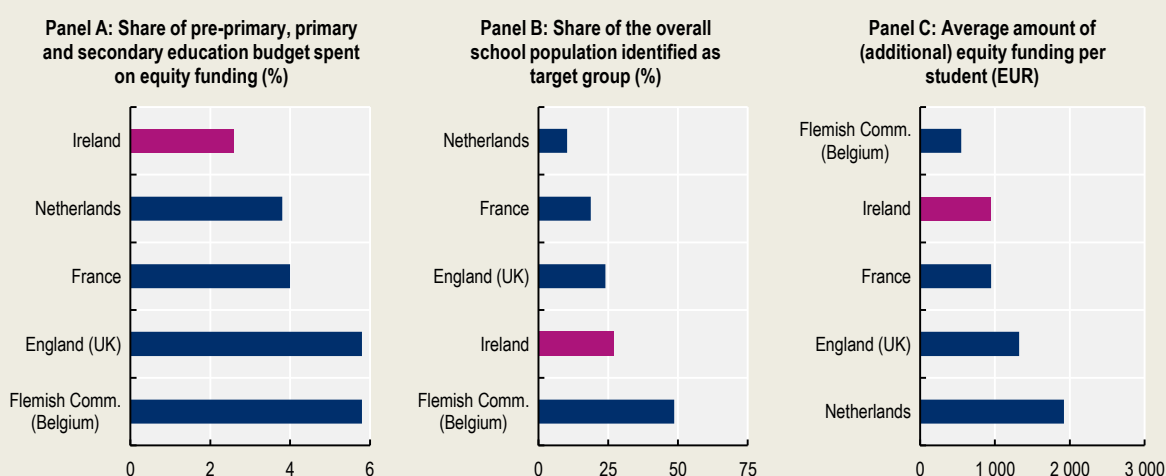
Note: Parameters in the figure relate to 2023 for Ireland (see Table 3.2) versus 2020 for other countries.
Sorted in descending order of the proportion of budget (panel A), proportion of the overall school population identified as target group (panel B) and average amount of additional equity funding per student (panel C).
Source: Adapted from Nicaise, Vandevoort and Verelst (2024[15]), "The effectiveness of equity funding of schools: a comparative analysis of Flanders, The Netherlands, France, Ireland and England" in *The Routledge International Handbook of Equity and Inclusion in Education*, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003282921.

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Ireland currently provides additional resources based on the DEIS status to 29.9% of its primary schools and 32.3% of its post-primary schools, catering for 28.0% of its students at primary and 25.5% at post-primary level (Chapter 1). Note, however, that "students in DEIS schools" include a publicly unknown number of non-disadvantaged students, while, on the other hand, a significant proportion of disadvantaged students attend non-DEIS schools. In Annex 3.A, the OECD review team proposes own rough estimates of the latter proportion, based on the overall proportion of students in DEIS schools (cited above) on the one hand, and the relative proportions of disadvantaged students within DEIS and non-DEIS schools reported in recent studies (Delaney et al., 2023[19]; Nelis et al., 2021[20]) on the other hand. According to these calculations, in 2021 primary DEIS schools catered for 42.3% of all disadvantaged students, while the corresponding coverage rate at post-primary level in 2018 amounted to 39.3%.[8] However, these estimates are based on samples and, more importantly, the DEIS scheme was extended in 2022.

The reason why DEIS does not cover all disadvantaged students is that only schools with a *concentration* of students identified as deprived by the HP Index receive DEIS support. DEIS aims to compensate for social disadvantage *at school and geographical area level, not at individual level*[9]. In a publication explaining the DEIS refined identification model since 2021, the Department of Education justifies this decision as follows (Department of Education, 2022, p. 13[21]):

> *"Disadvantage occurs throughout our communities and schools, and resources are provided to all schools to support all children to have the opportunity to reach their potential. The very nature of our school system is predicated on it being publicly funded. Universal provision, that all children can attend school for free, means that no child is excluded from accessing school due to financial disadvantage. The Department provides a wide range of supports to all schools, DEIS and non-DEIS, to support the inclusion of all students and address barriers to students achieving their potential."*

The DoE refers to examples of "universal" measures such as the lowered class size (23:1) in primary education, supporting staff and tools for students with special educational needs, schoolbook grants, psychological services, examination fee waivers for low-income students taking Junior Cycle examinations, and services provided by other departments, such as early childhood education and free school meals in primary schools. Furthermore, the Country Background Report, prepared by the DoE (2024[10]) for this Review, reports student support teams in post-primary schools, summer programmes (including a home-based programme), Transition Year (which acts as a bridge between Junior and Senior Cycles), local community-based programmes in deprived areas, such as the North East Inner City (NEIC) multidisciplinary teams and "City Connects" projects, the Ireland Traveller and Roma Strategy (focusing mainly on school attendance and transition to third-level education), and specific resources (mainly additional teaching hours) for students whose first language is not English. A detailed discussion of all these programmes can be found in Chapter 5.

Nevertheless, the DEIS programme remains specific in targeting exclusively schools with high concentrations of educational disadvantage, not individual disadvantaged students. From an internationally comparative perspective, the general trend since the turn of the millennium has been to shift towards more individualised student-based algorithms, often still combined with school- and/or area-based criteria in equity funding schemes (Bernardo and Nicaise, 2000[22]; Demeuse et al., 2008[14]).[10] See for example Box 3.3.

Box 3.3. Student-, school- and area-based characteristics used in the allocation of equity funding

In 2020, the OECD conducted a survey on equity funding schemes in 31 countries. Out of 28 countries that provided information on equity funding criteria at national level, 25 use student-based characteristics, 23 use school characteristics and 14 use indicators relating to the population by local areas (Figure 3.3). This means that most countries combine school- and student-based criteria in their allocation of equity funding, while half of them also use area-based criteria.

Figure 3.3. Student-, school- and area/population-based characteristics used in allocation of equity funding
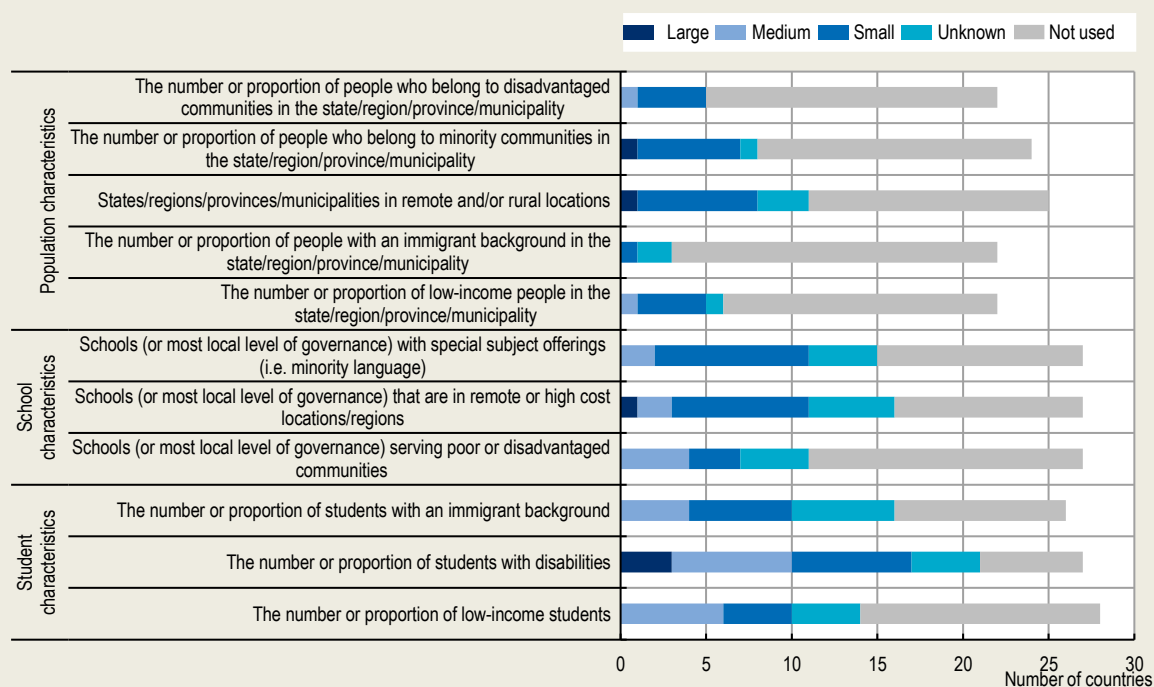
Source: OECD (2021[23]), Education at a Glance 2021: OECD Indicators, Figure D6.4, https://doi.org/10.1787/b35a14e5-en.

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Ireland predominantly uses school-based criteria: individual disadvantaged students do not generate additional funding for their school, unless there is a concentration of disadvantaged peers in the school. The "small area characteristics" linked to students' place of residence do not play the same role as area-based features linked to the location of schools – except for the urban-rural distinction at primary level.

Source: OECD (2021[23]), Education at a Glance 2021: OECD Indicators, https://doi.org/10.1787/b35a14e5-en.

In response to advancements in modern e-government, equity funding schemes are progressively transitioning towards student-centred algorithms. Under this approach, each student is assigned a weight based on various factors, including their home language, neighbourhood characteristics, parents'

educational attainment, income level, and other relevant variables. Student-based funding allows for a more fine-grained allocation of equity funding across schools as well as, in principle, a full coverage of the target population. The feasibility of this approach crucially depends on the possibility to integrate information on households across different government departments, in order to avoid the burden of data collection for schools. In some countries the government administration is even able (within the limits of privacy protection) to help schools identify the students that are socially disadvantaged, which may allow schools to target their support at those students even before challenges emerge. The main concern with this approach is the balance between the efficient targeting of support and the privacy protection of the students' families.

The *school-based* algorithm (the cornerstone of the DEIS scheme) is based on the overall composition of the school population rather than the social background of individual students. Empirical research suggests that the concentration of disadvantage within schools is an even stronger obstacle to educational success than the socio-economic disadvantage of individual students (Burger, 2019[24]; Flannery, Gilleece and Clavel, 2023[25]; Gustafsson, Nilsen and Hansen, 2018[26]; OECD, 2018[27]). This finding justifies a system of equity resourcing that rises *more than proportionately* with the number of disadvantaged students in any given school. As such, the DEIS programme prioritises schools with high concentrations of disadvantage and, at primary level, differentiates between three levels of additional support.

The categorisation remains, nevertheless, subject to debate: section Challenges will examine some issues relating to the thresholds used and their unintended implications.

The volume of additional investments in DEIS

Describing the precise financial effects of the DEIS programme on schools, especially tracking trends, is difficult due to its expansion over time. Additionally, specific supports within DEIS receive co-financing from different government departments, and funding allocations have been shifted between the Department of Education and the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration, and Youth (DCEDIY). Moreover, the Department of Social Protection provides funding to the School Meals Programme[11] which was confined to DEIS schools and extended to non-DEIS primary schools in 2024. Besides, there is support from the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS), from regional regeneration funds and local authorities for which the volume is unknown. Estimates must also be handled with care because the categories of government expenditure were aggregated differently between the reference years in Table 3.2.[12]

Given these warnings, Table 3.2 provides some estimates of key parameters relating to the budget allocation to DEIS in two reference years: 2016 (the year before the first extension of DEIS) and 2023 (the first year of full implementation of the second extension).

Table 3.2. Budget investment in DEIS (in current prices), 2016 and 2023

	2016	2023
Overall budget for primary, post-primary and post-secondary non-tertiary (millions EUR)	6 361.0	9 625.0
DEIS budget (millions EUR)	110.0	160.0
DEIS schools' estimated share in School Completion Programme (millions EUR)	21.6	29.8
DEIS schools' estimated share in School Meals Programme (millions EUR)	36.9	96.6
Total estimated additional investment in DEIS schools (millions EUR)	168.5	286.4
DEIS budget as percentage of overall budget	1.7%	1.7%
Total additional support to DEIS schools as percentage of overall budget	2.6%	3.0%
Number of students covered	172 197	260 839
Additional support per student per year (EUR)	978.5	1 098.0

Source: Department of Public Expenditure, NDP Delivery and Reform and Department of Finance (2021[28]), Expenditure Report 2016: Part II Expenditure Allocations 2016 – 2018, https://www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/181137/694a49bd-e585-4f24-9452-9b67c327e081.pdf#page=null (accessed 4 March 2024); Department of Public Expenditure, NDP Delivery and Reform and Department of Finance (2022[11]), Budget 2023 Expenditure Report: Part III - Estimates for Public Services, https://www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/235731/6615fabb-2e04-4249-8ff6-e43bd7342db2.pdf#page=null (accessed 4 March 2024).

The overall (measurable) investment in DEIS is quite modest compared with the overall budget for pre-primary, primary, post-primary and post-secondary non-tertiary education (3.0%). The share in the overall budget has increased slightly (0.4 percentage points) while the extension in terms of students covered was 50%. In terms of extra support per student, the estimated amount has increased 12.2% in nominal terms, but declined by 4.8% in real terms.[13]

Earmarking and conditioning of equity resourcing

A prominent feature of the DEIS programme is that most of the additional support to schools is provided in kind (and is thus earmarked). Earmarking might limit the freedom and flexibility of beneficiaries of support in using the funding. Yet, many decision makers at local level, including principals and teachers, may not always be sufficiently equipped to select the most effective and efficient instruments and strategies to combat educational disadvantage (OECD, 2023[29]). Teachers and principals tend to address educational disadvantage mainly from a pedagogical-didactical angle (such as through remediation classes, differentiation, specific language teaching tools) because that happens to be their strongest professional competence, while a more multidisciplinary approach is needed.[14] Many would also opt for straightforward solutions such as reduced class size, a strategy that is probably effective but not the only option, nor a sufficient condition by itself for better educational outcomes (Mathis, 2016[30]). According to the Education Endowment Foundation (2021[31]) the main argument against reduced class size is its high cost. Recent research also suggests that enhancing the qualifications of teachers has a stronger impact on the performance of disadvantaged students than a reduction of the student/teacher ratio (Education Endowment Foundation, 2021[31]; OECD, 2018[27]). Therefore, earmarking part of the resources for continuing professional learning of the school staff – as is the case with DEIS support – appears to be justified. According to the European Executive Agency for Education and Culture, Eurydice and Parveva (2017[13]), the majority of equity funding systems in Europe (24 out of 40 examined cases) finance professional learning activities for teachers – mandatory or not (Box 3.4).

Box 3.4. Types of activities supported by equity funding schemes in Europe

Table 3.3 provides an overview of the types of activities supported by equity funding schemes in Europe as of 2015/2016. The relative importance of each type is reflected by the frequency of use rather than budget volumes allocated. Additional staff and continuing professional learning support appeared used most often, followed by special allowances for teachers or other staff and career advice services for students.

Table 3.3. Types of activities supported by equity funding in European countries (2015/16)

	Extra educational staff and/or other staff	Special allowances for students/their families	Special allowances for teachers/other educational staff	Professional development opportunities	Reduced teaching time for teachers	Scholarships for students	Career advice for students
Austria	X	X	X	X		X	X
Bulgaria	X	X	X	X		X	X
Croatia	X						
Czechia	X			X			X
Denmark				X			
Estonia	X		X	X			X
France	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
French Comm. (Belgium)	X						
Germany	X		X				
German Comm. (Belgium)	X			X			
Greece	X	X		X			X
Hungary	X	X	X			X	
Iceland	X						
Ireland	X	X		X			X
Italy	X	X	X	X		X	X
Latvia	X		X	X			X
Lithuania	X	X		X			X
Luxembourg	X	X	X		X		
Malta	X		X	X			X
Norway				X			
Poland	X	X	X			X	
Portugal	X			X	X	X	
Romania	X	X	X	X	X	X	
Scotland (UK)	X		X	X			
Slovak Republic	X						
Slovenia	X	X	X	X			X
Spain	X			X	X		
Sweden	X		X	X			
Türkiye	X	X				X	X

Note: In England (United Kingdom), Finland, the Flemish Community of Belgium, the Netherlands, Northern Ireland (United Kingdom) and Wales (United Kingdom), there is no information available due to school autonomy.
Source: Adapted from European Executive Agency for Education and Culture, Eurydice and Parveva (2017[13]), Structural indicators on achievement in basic skills in Europe – 2016, Figure 5.3, https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2797/092314.

In the DEIS programme, the additional resources consist of two earmarked cash grants and a set of (in-kind) services, co-financed by various government departments, depending on the DEIS category (primary Urban Band 1 or 2 or Rural; or post-primary):

- DEIS grant (to be used for the implementation of a school-based DEIS action plan);
- Enhanced School Books Grant (now only for Senior Cycle at post-primary level);
- Additional teaching hours to reduce class size;
- Administrative Principal/Deputy Principal allocated at lower enrolment threshold;
- Access to School Completion Programme;
- Learning supports for literacy and numeracy;
- Support for the professional continuous learning of teachers;
- Planning supports (training for principals);
- School Meals Programme (free provision of meals to children); and
- Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) Coordinator.

The School Meals Programme is partly organised by local authorities (and voluntary organisations)[15] and financed by the Department of Social Protection, while the HSCL Coordinators are funded by the DoE. Note also that the responsibility for early childhood education is shared between the Department of Children and the Department of Education. A more extensive description of all supports can be found in Chapter 5.

Figure 3.4 displays the distribution of the DEIS budget and related support (SCP and SMP) by type of support.

Figure 3.4. Distribution of DEIS-related support by type (2023)
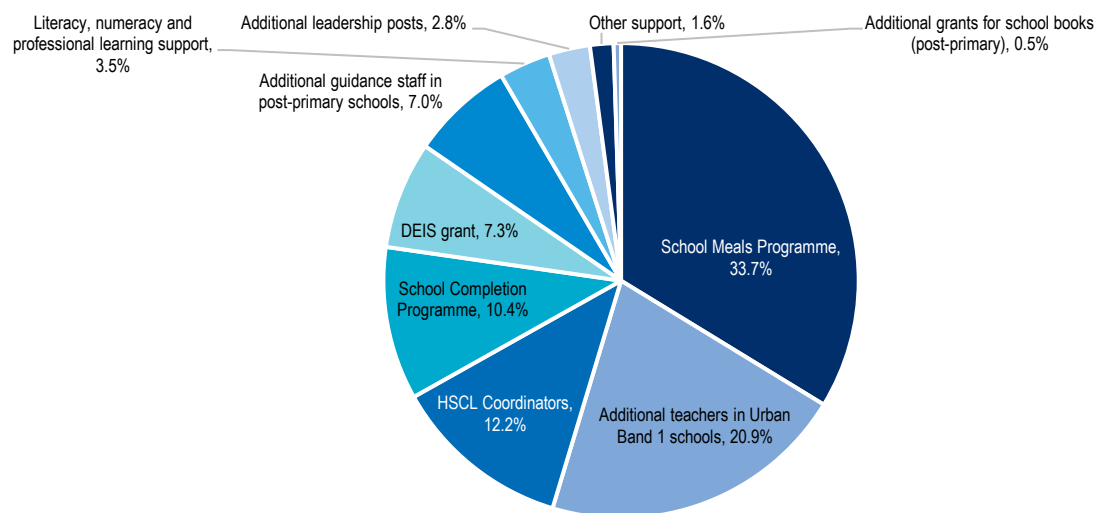
Source: Calculations based on data provided by the Department of Education.

StatLink https://stat.link/9bw83e

Approximately four-tenths (43%) of all additional resources granted to DEIS schools consist of additional staff (20.9% additional teachers in primary schools, 12.2% HSCL Coordinators, 2.8% vice-principals and administrative staff and 7.0% guidance staff in post-primary schools). Nearly half of the support (47.6%) consists of external services: mainly the School Completion Programme and the School Meals Programme

(which by itself accounts for one third of the investment in DEIS (33.7%)), but also supporting didactical materials and training. The cash transfers to schools include the DEIS grant (7.3%) and the schoolbooks grant for post-primary schools[16] (0.5%). The "other support" (1.6%) category relates to continuing professional learning, funding for the Early Start programme, the cost of increased National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) supports, etc.

All in all, this means that schools have little discretion on how to use the additional supports. During interviews and school visits, some principals and academics advocated greater flexibility and choice in the allocation of resources at the local level. In contrast, the DoE claimed that earmarking is a deliberate policy option informed by what works best to boost equal opportunities.

The international experience also shows that the use of earmarking practices depends on the degree of centralisation versus school autonomy that characterises national education systems (Nicaise, Vandevoort and Verelst, 2024[15]; OECD, 2017[32]). In more liberal systems, the government will rather recur to alternative accountability rules based on outcomes such as the reduction of performance gaps between disadvantaged and other students. The challenge with this approach might be that equity strategies take a lot of time to generate visible effects, which makes it harder to intervene timely when schools fail to produce satisfactory effects.

Nevertheless, many countries that implemented equity funding have also set conditions relating to the use of the additional resources. Schools are obliged to draw up specific action plans for the achievement of more equal outcomes and to evaluate the effectiveness of their own actions. In England (United Kingdom), schools are even obliged to publish their targets and progress online, not just in average performance but also in equity of outcomes (Department for Education, 2023[33]). Within DEIS, schools are also expected to develop their own DEIS action plans, including SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Time-bound) targets, and to evaluate their own achievements in terms of social equity of outcomes (Chapter 6). For this purpose, principals receive specific training, and they can get support from the DoE Inspectorate.

Irrespective of the monitoring and feedback by the Inspectorate, such planning and self-evaluation cycles are meant to boost the critical reflection of school teams on the effectiveness of their efforts; indirectly, this should lead to continuous self-monitoring, adaptation to changing needs and improvement of strategies for the schools.

Whereas a SMART operationalisation of the objectives was not available in earlier policy documents on DEIS, the DEIS Plan 2017 includes a table of clear and ambitious targets in relation to literacy and numeracy, school careers, teacher education, well-being and parental engagement. Schools are expected to set SMART targets for themselves in their local DEIS plans, with regard to eight key themes (Department of Education, 2024[10]):

- Attendance;
- Retention;
- Literacy;
- Numeracy;
- Well-being;
- Supporting educational transitions;
- Partnership with parents and others; and
- Academic outcomes (at the post-primary level only).

The next two sections will assess the strengths and challenges of the resourcing mechanisms of the DEIS programme as they have applied since 2022. Lessons from past arrangements will be referred to only if they help understand the latest policy reforms.

Strengths

The baseline resourcing of Irish schools is a relatively stable level playing field

It is useful to examine the DEIS resourcing mechanisms in conjunction with the baseline resourcing (i.e. resourcing that abstracts from the additional DEIS support) because experience in other countries shows that there are sometimes structural inequalities between schools that partly offset the effect of equity funding. Disadvantaged schools are often operating in older buildings, lack modern equipment, and have greater difficulties in attracting and retaining well-qualified teachers and principals, resulting in a so-called "Matthew effect" (OECD, 2023[29]; Poesen-Vandeputte and Nicaise, 2014[34]).[17] In the Irish case, this does not seem to be a major issue, at least at the primary level. Gilleece and Nelis (2023[35]) compared a set of indicators of school resourcing between DEIS Urban Band 1, Urban Band 2 and non-DEIS primary schools, based on the school survey linked to the National Assessment of Mathematics and English Reading (NAMER) 2021 (Table 3.4). In all three categories of schools, the teachers had on average 10-11 years of experience, while the distribution by gender and temporary/permanent employment status was very similar. Whereas nearly all teachers completed the initial teacher education, those working in non-DEIS schools had more often acquired an additional qualification (44-45%) than those teaching in DEIS Urban Band 1 (38-42%) and Urban Band 2 (30-34%) schools. However, these differences in additional qualifications of teachers do not seem to be correlated with their students' performance on national tests. The percentage of teachers participating in continuing professional learning or teacher professional learning (TPL) did not differ significantly by DEIS status (Gilleece and Nelis, 2023[35]). Nor did the problems in teacher recruitment or retention differ between the three categories of schools (ibid.).

Table 3.4. Difficulties in attracting and retaining teachers by DEIS status

Percentage of students in schools whose principals reported experiencing difficulties in attracting and retaining teachers

Difficulties over the last 12 months	Urban non-DEIS	Urban Band 1	Urban Band 2
Teacher recruitment difficulties	49.1	47.4	48.0
Teacher retention difficulties	22.9	16.6	22.8
Sourcing qualified substitute teachers when required	97.6	100.0	85.0

Note: Schools are weighted by the number of sixth-class students.
Source: Gilleece and Nelis (2023[35]), Ireland's 2021 National Assessments of Mathematics and English Reading: Exploring the home backgrounds, classrooms and schools of pupils in Urban DEIS schools, Table 4.5.

The authors did report some inequalities in relation to ICT materials and information books: whereas one in four students participating in NAMER 2021 did not have access to computers on average in primary schools, the problem was more common in DEIS schools, with some variation by type of DEIS school and class. A similar pattern emerges in regard to printed information books for students: two-fifths of the students in DEIS Urban Band 1 schools had no access to such books, against one in four students in non-DEIS schools (Gilleece and Nelis, 2023[35]). Moreover, DEIS school buildings were much less open to the community outside class hours than those of non-DEIS schools (ibid.).

As mentioned in Chapter 4, PISA 2022 data suggest that disadvantaged post-primary schools faced greater teacher shortages, including inadequate qualifications and challenges related to absenteeism (which was also reported anecdotally in interviews).[18]

All in all, abstracting from the DEIS support, the designated primary schools do not seem to be systematically less well-resourced through government funding, but post-primary DEIS schools do suffer disproportionately from a lack of human resources. DEIS schools also get less support from parents and

the local community: this is precisely one of the reasons for the additional DEIS investments. The survey carried out for the Society of St Vincent de Paul among parents and principals about voluntary contributions in post-primary schools showed that parents contribute less in DEIS schools (GrantThornton and SVP, 2023[36]). In regard to primary schools, Gilleece and Nelis (2023[35]) found that DEIS schools request fewer parental contributions (Table 3.5).

Table 3.5. Parental contributions requests by DEIS status

Percentage of students in schools whose principals reported requesting parental contributions

	Parental contribution requested (%)
Urban non-DEIS	66.0
Urban Band 1	21.5
Urban Band 2	30.0

Note: Schools are weighted by the number of sixth-class students
Source: Gilleece and Nelis (2023[35]), Ireland's 2021 National Assessments of Mathematics and English Reading: Exploring the home backgrounds, classrooms and schools of pupils in Urban DEIS schools, Table 4.2.

The use of the HP Index for the identification of needs enhances trust and support for DEIS

The DEIS identification mechanism has undergone significant improvements regarding the use of more overarching and objective measures. During the review visit and interviews with stakeholders, the OECD review team gained the impression that there was a lot of discontent about the allocation of DEIS resources in the past. While some respondents admitted that they were not aware of the criteria for the inclusion of schools in the DEIS programme, others thought that the criteria were arbitrary or a product of case-by-case bargaining. The adoption of the HP Index as a scientifically underpinned – though still imperfect – instrument was a significant step forward in identifying and prioritising the needs of schools for additional resources. The main advantages of the HP Index are the following (Department of Education, 2022[21]):

- It is based on census data and, hence, covers the entire Irish population and territory. Nation-wide statistics are reliable and stable for the derivation of indicators;
- The Index reflects the various dimensions of social disadvantage: economic, social, cultural and human capital;
- It is used by several Irish Government departments and services (Department of Health (DOH), Department of Rural and Community Development (DRCD), Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY), Pobal and the Higher Education Authority (HEA)). It is applied in several other areas of social policy (local development, mobility, health, the residential property price index), which makes policies more transparent and fosters opportunities for synergies;
- The updating of the Index is cheap as no specific data collection is required for its implementation. The burden of data collection is removed from schools and parents, and removes any incentive to manipulate data.

An additional feature of the algorithm used within DEIS is its focus on social disadvantage at the school level rather than the individual level. As was pointed out earlier, several studies have shown that the concentration of social disadvantage within residential or educationally localised pockets of disadvantage is far more harmful than a student's low individual socio-economic background. This justifies the priority of a school-level over an individual-level index of deprivation.

Earmarking and conditionality of DEIS resourcing ensures an adequate multidimensional tackling of disadvantage

A striking feature of the DEIS programme is that the bulk of additional resources granted to schools is earmarked and provided in kind. In many other countries, schools (or their intermediaries) get a supplement to their subsidies for operational costs and an additional block grant of teacher hours, which can be allocated to various teaching or non-teaching tasks (OECD, 2023[29]). In some cases, the additional teacher hours are also convertible into other types of professional services (European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, et al., 2020[37]). All these services are provided separately, though coordinated in packages, and schools cannot shift resources between them. As a result of this multi-pronged approach, there is a guarantee that schools tackle educational disadvantage using the whole range of instruments, rather than just reducing class size or engaging additional teaching staff. Moreover, schools are obliged to design their own DEIS plans with school-specific targets, and to evaluate their own progress (see Chapter 6). As indicated above, schools receive specific support for this planning and self-evaluation exercise, thus building capacity for strategic action. Overall, the strong steering by the DoE and the earmarking of DEIS supports may explain why a relatively modest budgetary effort proves to be effective in reducing social inequality in outcomes.

Challenges

The validity of the deprivation indicator could be further improved

Despite the progress achieved with the use of the HP Index as an indicator of social disadvantage, as argued in the previous section, there is room for further improvement of the algorithm for the allocation of DEIS resources.

First of all, the DoE could explore possibilities for balancing the content of the HP Index in the future. While stakeholders agree that it currently reflects the multidimensional reality of socio-economic disadvantage accurately, the limited inclusion of variables reflecting immigrant or ethnic minority status is surprising. It is partly remedied by the separate "weighting" of Traveller and Roma students, recently arrived refugees and students experiencing homelessness. In regard to immigrant newcomers in particular, there is a separate support programme for English as an additional language (EAL) as well as specific psychological advice and supports for teachers of newcomer students and those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds offered by NEPS. In its publication on the refined DEIS identification model, the DoE (2022[21]) explicitly mentions that the inclusion of (other) immigration-related variables has been examined and discarded after consideration of evaluation research that suggests that the native-immigrant performance gap becomes insignificant after controlling for socio-economic background and language spoken at home (see also OECD (2023[38])). Yet, the language variable may also capture the effects of "omitted third variables", such as other cultural and psychological barriers that are typically experienced by immigrant students (and the schools receiving them).

Ireland remains an outlier in this regard. Among the 40 equity funding schemes examined by the European Executive Agency for Education and Culture, Eurydice and Parveva (2017[13]), only 12 do not use immigrant status as a criterion for extra support to schools and a similar picture emerges from the OECD survey of 31 equity funding schemes (OECD, 2023[29]). A potential argument for Ireland's exceptional position is that its high-tech industries have also attracted highly qualified immigrants. However, this argument cannot be generalised to all immigrants. Therefore, further analysis of the possibilities for the development of a more fine-grained set of immigration-related indicators might be needed. Shifting immigrant patterns and the growing heterogeneity within the immigrant population should also be taken into account. Nelis et al. (2021[20]) observed persistent gaps linked to immigrant status and home language. It remains an open question whether language support and specific services for some refugee children are

sufficient to cover all the needs of students with an immigrant background. Furthermore, in statistical analyses, home language may also capture other hidden effects such as the cultural distance between home and host country and ethnic segregation. Some countries, such as the Netherlands, have, therefore, replaced the language spoken at home with other criteria such as geographical region of origin and duration of stay in the host country (see also Eurydice (2023[39])). If such data are unavailable in the Irish census, they could be collected together with data on language spoken at home and plugged into the algorithm for identification of eligible students, as is already the case for Traveller and Roma students.

Moreover, the rising concern about mental health issues among young people may justify a search for indicators of youth mental health at the Small Area level as an additional input into the HP Index. All in all, a variant of the HP Index may capture the specific needs of socially disadvantaged students in a more accurate way, without losing coherence with other policies using the same basic tool. The OECD review team acknowledges, however, that mental health indicators, at Small Area or individual level, are currently unavailable at the population level, even in the international context.

The room for improvement of the HP Index is illustrated by the validation study carried out by Gilleece and McHugh (2022[40]). They found high correlations (0.7 to 0.8) between the HP Index scores and two other potential indicators of social disadvantage at the post-primary level, one of which was the percentage of students entitled to an examination fee waiver. [19] Yet, the latter appeared to be a marginally better predictor of school-average reading performance than the more sophisticated HP Index.[20]

Apart from the content of the HP Index *per se*, the design of the algorithm transforming the Index into a classification tool is complex, with several stages of transformation, cutting-off and addition of data (see Chapter 1 for a detailed description of the algorithm). Although the focus on concentrations of disadvantage is beyond dispute, it remains unclear to what extent the resulting classification into four categories at the primary level (Urban Band 1, Urban Band 2, Rural and non-DEIS) and two at the post-primary level (DEIS and non-DEIS) is valid, what proportion of the theoretical target groups actually receives support, and to what extent the most disadvantaged students are receiving the strongest support.

Several interviewees during the OECD review mentioned that a relatively large number of "first-generation" beneficiary schools may no longer have the same high levels of concentrated disadvantage to merit inclusion in the DEIS programme. Although revising the eligibility of current beneficiaries is a sensitive political issue, continuing to provide levels of support beyond the identified need for such schools may result in horizontal equity issues that undermine the credibility of the selection criteria. Another consideration to be kept in mind is that the DEIS budget cannot be stretched indefinitely, which means that at some point, budget constraints may prevent positive decisions to cover needs (e.g. the claim for DEIS plus funding in areas of extreme deprivation (DCU Educational Disadvantage Centre, 2020[41]; DCU Educational Disadvantage Centre, 2022[42])) that are more pressing than those of historically included schools (vertical equity issues).[21]

The internal validity of the resulting classification deserves a closer inspection. The key question is not just to what extent the inequalities in outcomes *between DEIS and non-DEIS schools* are shrinking across time, but more importantly, to what extent *social inequalities* in outcomes *between students* are diminishing. To clarify this argument, it suffices to look at the research findings of Duggan et al. (2023[43]), who examined trends in inequalities in TIMSS science and mathematics performance in the fourth class over the period 2011-2019. The authors found a significant reduction of inequalities between DEIS and non-DEIS schools, but a significant increase in inequalities by socio-economic background at the student level. Karakolidis et al. (2021[44]) had already found similar results when comparing NAMER and TIMSS trends for mathematics between 2009 and 2015. There are *theoretically* three potential (and possibly complementary) explanations for this phenomenon: (a) part of the DEIS schools and students were not really disadvantaged (misallocation of DEIS resources among schools through "false positive" selection into DEIS); (b) the additional resources allocated to DEIS schools benefitted the less disadvantaged students within these schools more (Matthew effect within DEIS schools); (c) the achievement gap

between socially advantaged and disadvantaged students in non-DEIS schools continued to increase and this outweighed the beneficial effects of DEIS in the selected schools (coverage gap of the DEIS scheme or "false negative" exclusion from DEIS).

Note that these results do not cover the latest period[22] and do not yet allow to assess the validity of the HP Index. However, they suggest that, for the observed periods, the alignment between some of the selected schools and the target group of socio-economically disadvantaged students might not be entirely precise, possibly due to some misclassification issues or incomplete coverage of the target population. Similar research on more recent data, including immigrant background along with socio-economic indicators, as well as a wider set of outcomes, could help clarify the extent of some of the highlighted issues.

Thresholds in the DEIS classification result in large differences in levels of support

As explained in the section Context and features as well as in Chapter 1, primary schools are classified into four categories (Urban Bands 1 and 2, Rural and non-DEIS) while at the post-primary level, a dichotomy is used between DEIS and non-DEIS schools. The categorisation of schools is based on a combination of thresholds for the degree of disadvantage at the school and area level. Such thresholds in the allocation of additional resources (a minimum level of average disadvantage or a minimum share of disadvantaged students at school level) can have a range of adverse effects. To begin with, thresholds draw a dividing line between schools that benefit from additional resources and schools that do not, with a risk of fuelling stigma among the former and/or envy among the latter. They may also reinforce segregation, with non-targeted schools referring weaker students to those receiving extra support, or better-off parents opting out of the "stigmatised" schools.

From a mere resourcing point of view, dropping out of the selection, particularly at the post-primary level, can make a large difference. Vertical and horizontal equity issues may also arise between schools. For example:

- A large school may not receive support while serving a greater absolute number of socially disadvantaged students if it does not exceed a given concentration threshold; and
- Within a given DEIS category, differences in the severity of needs do not result in different levels of support, except for the DEIS grant and, partly, the allocation of HSCL Coordinators.[23]

There is an on-going debate about tapering of the DEIS support, i.e. using sliding scales of support instead of "in or out" thresholds. Schools that fall just outside the threshold for inclusion in the DEIS programme may also need additional support to foster social inclusion, despite the existence of mainstream instruments for that purpose as mentioned in the Context and features section. The demand of non-DEIS and Rural DEIS schools for the HSCL Scheme, mentioned during the OECD review team's interviews and school visits is just one example of such a much-advocated need. The relatively high proportion of socio-economically disadvantaged students who are currently not covered adds to the volume of needs. The OECD estimates that in 2021, the proportion of disadvantaged students going to non-DEIS schools stood at 49% at the primary level and 58% at the post-primary level (see Annex 3.A). The programme has since been extended to 322 additional schools, therefore, this proportion has likely decreased.

At the other end of the distribution, the most disadvantaged schools – backed by the Educational Disadvantage Centre of Dublin City University (2020[41]; 2022[42]) – advocate for the introduction of a DEIS plus category, claiming that their needs are overwhelming and the current level of support appears to be insufficient. Principals report severe cases of intergenerational poverty, family breakups, trauma linked to state care placement, homelessness, mental health issues, violence, (parental) substance abuse and bullying, all symptoms of pockets of extreme marginalisation that are not included in the HP Index. They flag the need for different kinds of additional support (additional infrastructure, administrative support,

in-service training for teachers, further reduction of class size) but mainly psychologists for trauma treatment, as well as preventive mental health care (see also Fleming and Harford (2021[45])).

The risk of misclassification is inherent in any typology using thresholds. This risk is illustrated in the study of the HP Index by Gilleece and McHugh (2022[40]). The authors cross-tabulated the quintile distributions of schools ranked by the HP Index scores with other indicators of disadvantage. For example, only 17 out of 31 schools (55%) in the bottom quintile of their (PISA) sample were classified in the same quintile using the HP Index and the PISA indicator of socio-economic status. Taking the two bottom quintiles together, the degree of overlap between both criteria increased to 67%. This might suggest that "in-or-out" cut-off lines, such as those used in DEIS may involve a non-negligible risk of misclassification, though further analysis is needed.[24]

Voluntary contributions continue to present a challenge to some parents

The issue of voluntary contributions (as well as other school-related costs charged to parents) has not been extensively researched yet and remains a subject of controversy. Based on the first wave of the cohort study Growing Up in Ireland, collected in 2017/18 for a representative sample of 7 563 9-year-old children, the ESRI published some key findings related to parental contributions (Trinity College Dublin, 2018[46]):

> *"59% of families of 9-year-olds paid a voluntary contribution to their child's primary school; 7% were asked for a contribution but did not pay; 34% were not asked for a contribution. Overall, 23% of families paid less than €50; 23% paid between €50 and €99 and 12% paid €100 or more."*

Yet, given the voluntary nature of the contributions, there were differences by level of income (Trinity College Dublin, 2018[46]):

> *"24% of families in the highest income group paid a voluntary contribution of €100 or more, compared to 5% of families in the lowest income group."*

More recent figures are available from the school principal questionnaire of NAMER 2021, which asked, among other things, whether the school asked parents for a school contribution (Gilleece and Nelis, 2023[35]). The findings are in line with the Growing Up in Ireland survey. They also show that DEIS schools tend to be far more cautious in this matter. Whereas 66% of students in the urban non-DEIS had principals who replied that they asked for voluntary contributions, only 21% of DEIS Urban Band 1 and 30% of Urban Band 2 students' principals did so. This suggests that the DEIS support (in particular, the grants for operating costs and the School Books Grant Scheme) helps these schools reduce the financial pressure on parents. The flip side of this advantage is that it may reinforce segregation, by attracting more socio-economically disadvantaged students into DEIS schools. Note also that not asking for voluntary contributions does not necessarily mean that there are no paying services offered by the schools. Most Irish schools, even at the primary level, continue charging parents for various kinds of items other than the usual parental expenses relating to school uniforms, sports outfits, meals (at the post-primary level) or after-school supervised study (for example, rent of lockers, learning materials, excursions, maintenance, and secretarial costs) (GrantThornton and SVP, 2023[36]). Chapter 5 discusses the findings of these surveys in greater detail.

The Irish law (Section 64 of the Admissions to School Act 2018) already prohibits requests for voluntary contributions, or any kind of other contribution, when parents apply for enrolment or re-enrolment in a school (Government of Ireland, 2018[47]). The DoE has also sought to legislate for increased consultation between school communities in regard to the planning, policies and activities in schools. The Students and Parents Charter Bill was published in September 2019 and has been passed by the Seanad (the upper house of the Irish parliament). The Bill passed Second Stage in *Dáil Éireann* (lower house of the Irish parliament) in July 2021 and is awaiting an order for Committee Stage (Houses of the Oireachtas, 2019[48]).

This Bill provides for the Minister to issue guidelines and for all schools to prepare a Charter, following consultation with parents and students. The overall aim of the Bill is to improve the level of engagement between the school and community by inviting feedback, comments and observations from the community on a range of issues, including voluntary contributions and how they are spent, as well as complaint procedures.

There is also a separate private members bill, the Education (Voluntary Contributions) Bill, which was introduced in parliament in 2021. This bill aims to mandate the Minister of Education to regulate (not abolish) voluntary contributions (Houses of the Oireachtas, 2022[49]). This bill would mean schools would be obliged to inform parents that contributions are not mandatory, and that the enrolment of their children cannot be made dependent on the payment of voluntary contributions.

In the meantime, the (universal) school capitation grant for operating costs of primary and post-primary schools has been increased, first to compensate for the peak in energy prices in 2021-22, and next to roll out the free books scheme into all primary schools and Junior Cycle at the post-primary level, including other books, audio and digital materials. Parents/Guardians will no longer be required to make any contribution towards the cost of schoolbooks (except for Senior Cycle), including the cost of core classroom resources, in the school year 2024/25. Schools will be required to communicate with parents/guardians in relation to the scope of the scheme in their school. The extension of the School Meals Programme, financed by the Department of Social Protection, and prioritised towards schools in the DEIS programme, is also worth mentioning. Until recently, it was targeted at DEIS primary schools only, but as of April 2024 it was made available to primary students outside of DEIS schools (Department of Education, 2024[10]). At the post-primary level, exam fees have not been requested for 2023 and 2024. There is an income-based exemption in place, which means children from lower-income families do not need to pay. Additional funding has been channelled to the School Transport Scheme, which has allowed for reduced school transport charges for families who use the scheme. Eligible children with a medical card and children with special educational needs are exempt from the annual ticket charge. Civil society organisations continue to demand further measures. For example, in May 2023 St Vincent de Paul published a report on voluntary contributions in post-primary schools, based on a (non-representative) online survey of 1 447 parents, along with a survey of 19 schools and six interviews with principals (GrantThornton and SVP, 2023[36]).[25] Almost all (86%) of the parents declared that their school had asked for such contributions: they ranged between EUR 30 and EUR 550 (euros), with an average of EUR 140. Moreover, 80% claimed that the school had not clearly communicated that the charges were optional. Many parents also complained about other school-related costs that were not tagged as voluntary contributions, such as classroom resources, school clubs, fees for Transition Year and Junior Cycle and Leaving Certificate examinations. The main recommendation of the report is a re-evaluation of the capitation grant to schools, which was eroded due to austerity measures in the 2010-2020 period. According to the authors of the online survey report, a 33% uprating would be needed to compensate for the loss of value in that decade only (ibid.).[26]

Policy recommendations

Further strengthen access to free education

The principle of progressive universalism in social policies implies that targeted support for disadvantaged groups should always build on a strong basis of universal rights. The right to free education (at least up to the lower secondary level) is enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as well as the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child. At the European Union (EU) level, it is included in the European Pillar of Social Rights and the Child Guarantee agenda. As mentioned in Chapter 2, Ireland has adhered to all these conventions and joint commitments. Free access to post-primary education (e.g. Transition Year in Ireland) remains a matter for debate, depending on the legal duration of compulsory education.

The increased baseline funding for the operation expenses of schools set out in the previous section can be seen as part of the "universal" counterpart of the selective DEIS funding (which includes the DEIS grant[27]) (Houses of the Oireachtas, 2022[49]). Under a regime of free school choice, a sound balance between both pillars (universal and targeted) is essential to prevent social segregation among schools, with a concentration of students from low-income families in strongly subsidised disadvantaged schools, while other schools would remain accessible only to middle- and upper-class children due to low public resourcing supplemented with high voluntary contributions. While recognising the importance of consultation, information and negotiation of financial contributions with parents and students as well as all steps implemented to reduce costs for parents in recent years, the OECD review team suggests taking further financial and monitoring measures to guarantee free basic education for all:

1. Reviewing, by level of education, the categories of costs that should not be charged to parents in accordance with international conventions, such as examination fees (currently temporarily suspended), administrative costs, and rent of lockers (more generally, all goods and services that are directly linked to the achievement of educational attainment targets);

2. Monitoring periodically the actual school-related expenses by parents through surveys and, if needed, adjusting the capitation grant to a level that allows schools to fully cover at least the costs referred to in point 1.; and

3. Advising schools on how to minimise charges and how to manage voluntary contributions correctly; and, if needed, sanctioning unlawful pressure exercised by schools.

Continue refining and validating the indicator(s) of social disadvantage underpinning the targeting of DEIS resources

The analysis of the HP Index in the previous sections revealed both strengths and shortcomings of this indicator. Strengths include the multidimensionality and relatively cheap derivation of the HP Index, its privacy-proofness and the absence of administrative burden on schools, as well as its use in several policy areas. More recently, other individual characteristics were combined with the HP Index for Traveller and Roma students, homeless and refugee children. Language barriers are also being addressed through specific language support for non-native speakers.

However, the HP Index remains mainly socio-economic and only indirectly and partly captures the disadvantages linked to (a) psychological and socio-emotional well-being, and (b) cultural barriers and immigrant background. Yet, there is evidence in the international literature about the obstacles linked to mental health issues and students with an immigrant background.[28] Thus, the target effectiveness and efficiency of the DEIS programme could be improved by including additional dimensions of social disadvantage.

Further research would also be helpful to assess (and possibly improve) the scientific validity of the HP Index as a key indicator. The finding by Gilleece and McHugh (2022[40]) that a single variable (the percentage of students entitled to an exam fee waiver for the Junior Cycle examination) predicted average reading performance at school level better than HP Index values underscores the need for on-going and detailed consideration of the most appropriate variables to use in identifying DEIS schools. Such validation studies should be repeated at primary as well as post-primary levels, with a range of relevant dependent variables (e.g. cognitive and non-cognitive outcomes, early leaving from education and training, transition to tertiary education[29]) to sketch a comprehensive picture of the predictive power of the (present or amended) HP Index and alternative indicators. Chapter 6 discusses some options relating to alternative data sources that may supplement (or, in the future, replace) the HP Index with more direct information on the social profile of students.

Examine scenarios to attenuate the adverse effects of key thresholds in the DEIS classification algorithm

The present algorithm that results in the classification of schools uses mainly two key characteristics of the student body at the school level, derived from the HP Index: a weighted "severity" of disadvantage and its "extent" (the proportion of students considered disadvantaged). Cut-off thresholds are used at the individual level to measure degrees of disadvantage (with low-scoring students getting a zero weight and the most severely disadvantaged getting a double weight), and subsequently at the school level and area-level to classify schools. The combination of thresholds at individual, school and area levels makes the algorithm complex and less predictable, which results in frustration among some schools that are not part of the programme. Above all, the "all-or-nothing" threshold at the post-primary level makes it more difficult to cut back on schools that no longer qualify for support because their scores of disadvantage are insufficient (or have fallen). The addition of the "borderline threshold"[30] to include students with scores just below the initial threshold was a way to accommodate for the pressure from schools at the margins of the DEIS programme. However, this extension did not alter the "in-or-out" thresholds at school and area levels. As was argued in the section on Challenges, such thresholds involve a non-negligible risk of misclassification and may unintendedly create inequalities in the treatment of similar schools.

It is, therefore, worth examining if smoother algorithms could be designed. Several options can be considered based on the same principle. Using the complete distributions of the HP Index at the individual level and the concentration at the school level:

- At the individual level, a continuous value of the degree of disadvantage or an interval variable using more than four values (0, 0.5, 1 and 2) measuring the severity of disadvantage;

- At the school level, a continuous value (ranging from zero to one, for example) reflecting the degree of concentration of disadvantage, based on the proportion of students exceeding a given threshold of disadvantage in the school, or an interval variable using more than three thresholds at smaller intervals (also at the post-primary level).

The school weights could be calculated using some kind of multiplicative combination of the two criteria, with every student's score increasing as the proportion of disadvantaged peers increases. For schools with a low concentration, a limited DEIS supplement could apply so that fewer schools would feel excluded, whereas schools with a high concentration of very severe disadvantage (the "DEIS plus candidates") would be more heavily supported.

The resulting algorithm would be "smoother" and more "logical". It would avoid the "stacking" of cut-off lines in successive steps at individual and school levels. The classification into Urban Band 1, Urban Band 2 and Rural could even become redundant if a wider variation of scores is used at the school level. The "penalties" of misclassification would also be reduced because of the smoother distribution of resources.

The relatively rigid division between earmarked sub-packages could make up a potential obstacle to the implementation of a "thresholdless" resourcing scheme under the DEIS programme. In principle, different categories of staff could be allocated on a part-time basis (expressed in hours per month, for example). However, this would increase the costs of administration and transport between schools. An intermediate solution could, therefore, consist of a formula with multiple smaller thresholds derived from the "smooth" algorithm. The city of Hamburg (Germany) offers an instructive example of a school-level social index with six levels (Box 3.5).

Of course, all these suggestions would necessitate an *ex-ante* study, including simulations of the redistributive effects between schools in terms of support received. The impact on "winners" and "losers" should be carefully examined before the implementation of any alternative algorithm, taking into account that redistribution of resources is less painful under extending budgets than under "zero-sum games".

Note also that the "tapering" of the DEIS classification and the enrichment of the HP indicator (and its add-ons) can be implemented separately, in subsequent stages.

Box 3.5. Index-based equity funding for schools in Hamburg (Germany)

In 1996, the German city state of Hamburg introduced a *Sozialindex* (Social Index) for all public schools to distribute additional staff and funding to schools. The Social Index is calculated using eight indicators based on which schools are assigned to one of six Levels (Level 1 indicating disadvantaged student populations and Level 6 student populations from an advantaged socio-economic background):

- The proportion of students with non-German family languages;
- The proportion of students with special education needs;
- The proportion of students receiving educational assistance (*Bildungs- und Teilhabepaket*);
- The proportion of school leavers with general higher education entrance qualifications in students' areas of residence;
- The proportion of under-15-year-olds receiving social benefits in the students' area of residence;
- The proportion of eligible people receiving educational assistance in the students' areas of residence;
- The proportion of 15-65-year-olds who are unemployed in students' areas of residence; and
- Voter turnout in students' areas of residence.

The eight indicators are merged from different data collections, and data from the last three years is collated to mitigate the effects of annual fluctuations. The Social Index is updated every five years.

Schools at Level 1 and 2 receive more staff to form smaller classes. Primary schools at Levels 1 and 2 receive more funding and staff for special needs education. In lower secondary schools, funding and staff are allocated on a per-student basis and schools at Levels 1 and 2 receive more funding per student than those at Levels 3-6. The lower the Social Index of a school, the more staff hours they receive for language support and all-day care.

The Social Index is also used to draw comparisons between schools in comparative assessments and to form comparison groups in the context of educational reporting. This serves to prevent schools with more difficult circumstances from being compared with more advantaged schools without considering the social context in which they operate.

Source: Schulte, Hartig and Pietsch (2014[50]), "Der Sozialindex für Hamburger Schulen [The social index for schools in Hamburg]" in *Grundlagen für eine daten- und theoriegestützte Schulentwicklung [Foundations for data- and theory-supported school development]* and OECD (2022[51]), Quality and Equity of Schooling in the German-speaking Community of Belgium, https://doi.org/10.1787/9a6b6f3a-en.

Extend partial additional support to all students defined as disadvantaged

In the introductory section, it was acknowledged that all schools have access to a limited array of specific resources and instruments to cater to socially disadvantaged students. It was also acknowledged that priority resourcing of schools dealing with a concentration of disadvantage is justified, as concentration *per se* has a negative effect on students' learning opportunities. Nevertheless, there are several arguments to invest more in all disadvantaged students, irrespective of their school's degree of concentration:

- Individual socio-economic and cultural minority background also affects the opportunities of students, irrespective of concentration effects (Burger, 2019[24]; Gustafsson, Nilsen and Hansen, 2018[26]; OECD, 2018[27]).

- From an ethical point of view, all disadvantaged students have a right to additional support if the policy objective is to achieve equal opportunities. This individual entitlement would also mean that students making transitions between schools or levels of education would always continue to benefit from some extra support, irrespective of the location or composition of their new school.

- In the Irish case, in particular, the present focus on concentration schools appears to cover less than half of the disadvantaged student population – although the precise impact of the extension of DEIS in 2022 is not yet known (see Annex 3.A). Moreover, two studies suggest that the reduced gap between DEIS and non-DEIS schools does not (yet) seem to coincide with a reduced gap between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged students (Duggan et al., 2023[43]; Karakolidis et al., 2021[44]). This could suggest that, during the observed periods, the alignment between some of the selected schools and the target group of socio-economically disadvantaged students might not be entirely precise. Nonetheless, as mentioned earlier, further work is needed to draw any strong conclusions.

- Covering all disadvantaged students reduces the harmful effects of potential misclassification of schools, compared with a scheme where (rather artificial) cut-off lines determine eligibility for a full package of additional resources.

- The current combination of measures and resources, besides DEIS, could be integrated into a more coherent overall framework to address social disadvantage.

- Full coverage of the target group(s), irrespective of their geographical environment, also means that all schools are accountable for the achievement of equal opportunities. The shared responsibility of all schools is important, not only *vis-à-vis* the disadvantaged students themselves, but also from a political point of view. If all schools are (at least potentially) eligible for some DEIS funding, however limited the extra funding may be, the support for DEIS at the grassroots level will grow. Even schools with relatively low concentrations of disadvantaged students may be more inclined to accept applicants from disadvantaged backgrounds and maybe reach out to them as a way to take up social responsibility. Stigmatisation of selected DEIS schools, envy effects and strategic behaviour that could result in enhanced segregation would be avoided.

The combination of full coverage of the target groups and enhanced funding of concentration schools would consistently reflect the principle of progressive universalism, which is widely advocated in social policies. Progressive universalism is an ethical principle that combines quality services for all, based on fundamental rights, with priority investment in vulnerable groups due to their higher level of needs.

Prepare the periodic updating of the indicators of social disadvantage to develop a more dynamic resource allocation model

The revision of the criteria for inclusion of schools in the DEIS programme since 2017 has led to additional schools receiving support. During the review process, the OECD review team learned that dozens of schools that were already included earlier but do not currently have the same level of disadvantage based on the HP Index have continued to receive full support. A revision of the support level spread over several years would be recommended to allow schools to adjust their internal resource allocation.

Similarly, the newly available data from the 2022 census has led to an update of the HP Index. The social profile of schools and neighbourhoods may have changed due to the mobility of residents, recent immigration waves, urban regeneration programmes, changing labour market conditions, etc., which might necessitate a re-targeting of support. The allocation of DEIS resources might need to be adjusted on a periodic basis, taking shifts in the social profile of schools into account, to prevent new inequities from arising. As such, this raises the sensitive issue of cutbacks, and in some cases, phasing-out, of support for schools whose needs have diminished. Cutbacks should not be seen as a "penalty on good performance" because the allocation of DEIS support occurs exclusively on the basis of exogenous measures of need. Nor should phasing out some schools result in layoffs if services are gradually

reallocated to other schools. The combination of a "smoother" algorithm, advocated in the previous recommendation, combined with transition periods spread over several years could make the reallocation of resources more acceptable and prepare the ground for future adjustments.

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Annex 3.A. Alternative estimation of the proportion of disadvantaged students in DEIS and non-DEIS schools

Both Delaney et al. (2023[19]) (based on PIRLS 2021) and Nelis et al. (2021[20]) (based on PISA 2018) provide information on the proportion of disadvantaged students within DEIS and non-DEIS schools, as well as the proportion of all students by DEIS status of their school in the respective samples. The combination of these figures allows us to estimate the proportion of disadvantaged students attending DEIS schools at the time of measurement.

Let D_D represent the proportion of disadvantaged students in DEIS schools and D_N the proportion of disadvantaged students in non-DEIS schools; and let S represent the share of the overall student population attending DEIS schools; then the share of all disadvantaged students attending schools DEIS (S_D) equals $D_D*S / [D_D*S + D_N*(1-S)]$.

The relevant parameters can be found in Annex Table 3.A1 for primary education and Annex Table 3.A2 for post-primary education.

The estimation for primary education is based on Delaney et al. (2023[19]). At this level, the formula must be adjusted to take into account the four categories of DEIS schools.

Annex Table 3.A1. Parameters used for estimation of DEIS coverage at primary level

DEIS status	Proportion disadvantaged	Share of student population
Urban Band 1	60%	10.9%
Urban Band 2	45%	6.9%
Rural	32%	3.9%
Non-DEIS	19%	78.3%

Source: Delaney et al. (2023[19]), PIRLS 2021: Reading results for Ireland, Figure 3.4 and Figure 3.7.

The share of disadvantaged students in primary DEIS schools in 2021 is thus estimated at 42%.

Analogously, at the post-primary level, Nelis et al. (2021[20]) report disadvantaged proportions as shown in Annex Table 3.A2.

Annex Table 3.A2. Parameters used for estimation of DEIS coverage at post-primary level

DEIS status	Proportion disadvantaged	Share of student population
DEIS	41%	24%
Non-DEIS	20%	76%

Source: Nelis et al. (2021[20]), Beyond achievement: home, school and wellbeing findings from PISA 2018 for students in DEIS and non-DEIS schools, Figure 4.4.

The "adjusted" share of disadvantaged students in post-primary DEIS schools in 2018 then equals 39%.

Two assumptions are necessary to arrive at these estimations:

- Representativeness of the PIRLS/PISA samples in terms of composition of the DEIS schools; and
- Adequacy of the criteria used to identify disadvantaged students (i.e. the bottom quartile of socio-economic status).

Notes

[1] The term "baseline funding" is used as the generic set of rules for the funding of education (or schools) irrespective of the additional funding prevailing under DEIS.

[2] GNI* is defined as GNI less factor income of redomiciled companies, less depreciation on research and development service imports and trade in intellectual property, and less depreciation on aircraft leasing.

[3] The capitation grant is first based on the number of students in the previous school year and corrected for the revised number of students in April of the current school year. In addition to the capitation grant, there are a number of smaller grants based on a variety of other criteria, which makes the school funding less transparent and equitable than could be expected (GrantThornton and SVP, 2023[36]).

[4] Whereas most people would agree that inequalities based on social background need to be eliminated, there are differences in the belief how far an individual's potential can be achieved. From a meritocratic perspective, this potential is constrained by (mainly innate) ability. However, ability is hard to measure accurately and observed ability appears to be correlated with social background, which suggests that the "meritocratic dream" can never be achieved. By contrast, egalitarianists tend to attribute the correlation between ability and social background to influences from the home environment on children's cognitive development and claim that the social gradient of ability itself can/should be eliminated too (Elford, 2015[53]).

[5] Ireland is subdivided in 18 919 small areas, each covering just under 100 households.

[6] Within any DEIS category, the level of some types of support is (partly or fully) proportional to the number of qualifying students, not the severity of needs, while other types of support are independent of the number of qualifying students.

[7] Note that in the Flemish Community of Belgium, students are given different weights depending on a combination of a set of social characteristics to reflect different degrees of disadvantage at individual level. The additional resources are then allocated to schools on the basis of the overall weight of their student population, rather than the number of disadvantaged students as such. This also means that, among the 49% eligible students, many have a relatively low weight.

[8] Note that the definitions of "disadvantage" used by Delaney et al. (2023[19]) and Nelis et al. (2021[20]) – who use PIRLS and PISA data, respectively – differ from the DEIS definition. However, we have no reason to believe that the former definitions are less valid than the DEIS definition.

[9] In the Irish case, bundles of geographical areas are actually "weighted" via the HP Index values of students.

[10] Until the turn of the millennium, resourcing schemes were mainly based on the geographical location of schools within disadvantaged districts or regions (e.g. Title I in the United States Educational Priority Areas in the United Kingdom, *Zones d'Education Prioritaire* (Priority Education Zones) in France). In some cases (e.g. in the United States) the geographical demarcation was meant to compensate for inequalities generated by the decentralised funding of schools. In other cases (e.g. *Territórios Educativos de Intervenção Prioritária* (Priority Intervention Educational Territories) in Portugal) coordinated cross-sectoral policies were conducted to address the cumulation of disadvantage in urban areas of localised disadvantage or remote rural areas. However, the targeting of territories in education generally lacks precision in coverage, leaving large numbers of disadvantaged students residing or going to schools in other areas without additional support (Bernardo and Nicaise, 2000[22]; Demeuse et al., 2008[14]).

[11] The School Meals Programme is in principle organised by local authorities, and, therefore, probably also partly financed by them. Statistics about the financial contribution of local authorities are not available.

[12] In 2016 the Department of Education and Skills was responsible for the whole education and training system (including tertiary education and vocational training). The budget breakdown for capital investments by level of education was not published in the budget expenditure report.

[13] Consumer prices rose 17% between December 2016 and December 2023 in Ireland.

[14] The North East Inner City Multi-Disciplinary Team model involving school leadership, teachers, NEPS, the Inspectorate and other support services working in eight primary schools can be seen as an example of good practice.

[15] There are actually two components in the School Meals Programme: a statutory scheme for urban primary schools, organised by local authorities, and a non-statutory scheme operated (or outsourced) by the schools themselves. Both schemes are co-financed by the DSP.

[16] At the primary level, the grants for school books are universal and therefore not linked to DEIS.

[17] The label "Matthew effect" is used to denote the regressive distribution effects of public expenditure. The expression was launched by the sociologists Robert Merton and Harriett Zuckerman.

[18] In PISA, a socio-economically disadvantaged school is a school in the bottom quarter of the index of economic, social and cultural status in the relevant country.

[19] Data on the percentage of students entitled to an examination fee waiver are available up to 2020 only as examination fees have not been levied since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

[20] It should be noted that the HP Index element did not incorporate the additional elements included in the refined DEIS identification model (i.e. students residing in International Protection Accommodation Services centres, Emergency Orientation and Reception Centres, those experiencing homelessness, and Traveller and Roma children) who would all have met the threshold for an examination fee waiver. However, these minorities are probably small relative to other disadvantaged groups.

[21] A horizontal equity issue arises when two or more schools with identical needs are funded unequally. A vertical equity issue refers to a situation where a school with greater needs is funded less than schools with more limited needs.

[22] Donohue et al. (2023[52]) examined trends in mathematics performance in PISA between the waves of 2012 and 2022. They found a decrease in the average performance gap between the top and bottom socio-economic quartiles between 2012 and 2018, largely offset by an increase between 2018 and 2022. However, they did not want to examine trends by DEIS status because of changes in the DEIS criteria and selective non-response issues within DEIS schools.

[23] The DEIS grant is proportional to the number of disadvantaged students in the DEIS school.

[24] A precise estimate of the extent of misclassification remains hazardous because the HP Index does not cover all Traveller and Roma students, homeless and refugee children, for whom corrections are made in the DEIS definition of disadvantage. However, the resulting error is not expected to be very large. Note also that the PISA sample size is limited and covers only 15-year-olds whereas the DEIS selection covers all students within the selected schools.

[25] See Chapter 5 for a more extensive discussion of this report.

[26] This recommendation preceded the recent measures. It was not possible to verify to what extent the most recent measures closed the gap estimated in the report.

[27] The "baseline" capitation grant is a lump sum cash transfer to schools per student aimed to cover all running expenses of schools. In the Irish case, the mainstream capitation grant is not equal for all students, as enhanced capitation grants apply for students with special educational needs, and Traveller and Roma students. The DEIS grant is a lump sum supplement for students tagged as disadvantaged in DEIS schools.

[28] In regard to the relationship between mental health and educational achievement, see e.g. "Research summaries: The relationship between mental health and academic achievement" (National Association of School Psychologists, 2020[56]). As for the relationship between migration background and educational achievement, see e.g. "Closing the Gap for Immigrant Students" (OECD, 2010[58]) or "The Impact of National and School Contextual Factors on the Academic Performance of Immigrant Students" (Finch, Hernández Finch and Avery, 2021[57]).

[29] The HP Index has already been used in studies of progression into higher education (Higher Education Authority, 2019[55]) and further education and training (Connor and Guerin, 2019[54]).

[30] In 2017, the threshold for students to qualify as disadvantaged was set at -10 for the HP Index. In 2022, the algorithm was extended to students with HP Index scores between -7.5 and -10, who are assigned a weight of 0.5.

4 Capacity building for schools to address educational disadvantage

This chapter examines policies to strengthen Irish schools' capacity to promote equity and inclusion in education, with a particular focus on schools benefiting from the DEIS programme. It addresses the initial preparation of teachers and school leaders, their continuing professional learning, working conditions and career development, as well as the professional support that staff receive in and around DEIS schools. The chapter also considers the school improvement process and schools' capacity to function as learning organisations. It identifies strengths and challenges related to each of these policy areas and provides policy recommendations to address them. The overarching question addressed by the chapter is how to strengthen schools' capacity to make the best possible use of their resources to support and provide educational opportunities to students who are at greatest risk of educational disadvantage.

Context and features

DEIS schools face unique challenges in improving the outcomes of students at risk of educational disadvantage. Teachers and principals in Ireland do not work in isolation. Since the DEIS programme's inception in 2005, it has aimed to provide education professionals with additional resources to meet their students' needs. Building on the experience of DEIS schools, successive reforms of the programme have sought to further refine these supports and strengthen schools' ability to use them effectively (see Chapter 1). Although the chapter places its focus on teachers and principals in DEIS schools, they are supported by a wide range of professionals who complement and reinforce their professional capacity. Teachers and principals work with guidance counsellors, special education teachers (SET), special needs assistants (SNA), Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) Coordinators, School Completion Programme (SCP) staff and Student Support Teams.

Following a 2015 evaluation of the DEIS programme by the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) (Smyth, McCoy and Kingston, 2015[1]), the Department of Education (DoE) initiated a comprehensive review of the programme (Department of Education and Skills, 2017[2]). This review culminated in the "DEIS Plan 2017: Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools", which set out a vision for the programme's future, including five key goals and associated interventions. One of the goals articulated by the Plan was the enhancement of the capacity of school leaders and teachers to engage, plan and deploy resources effectively (Department of Education and Skills, 2017[3]). It is against the backdrop of this goal that the following sections of this chapter will evaluate and develop recommendations to further improve Ireland's capacity building efforts.

Profile of the Irish teaching workforce

In 2022, there were 74 073 full-time equivalent (FTE) teachers in Ireland, of which 41 623 were working in one of the 3 231 primary schools and 32 450 were working in one of the 727 post-primary schools (Government of Ireland, 2024[4]). In total, over 102 000 primary and post-primary teachers were registered with the Teaching Council in March 2023 (The Teaching Council, 2023[5]). Since 2017 the total number of FTE teachers had grown by 9 381 (14.5%) overall (13.2% in primary education and 16.2% in post-primary education). Over the same period, student numbers had dropped by 0.9% in primary and risen by 13.7% in post-primary education over the same time period. As a consequence, student-teacher ratios have decreased steadily in primary schools and remained fairly constant in post-primary schools (Table 4.1).

Table 4.1. Trends in teacher number and student-teacher ratios

Indicator	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Primary teachers (total)	36 773	37 341	37 839	38 604	40 351	41 623
Primary teachers (mainstream)	22 430	22 747	22 970	23 460	23 572	23 596
Primary teachers (other)	14 343	14 594	14 869	15 144	16 779	18 027
Post-primary teachers	27 919	28 474	29 093	30 617	32 145	32 450
Total number of teachers	64 692	65 815	66 932	69 221	72 496	74 073
Average student-teacher ratio in primary schools	15.3	15.2	15.0	14.5	13.7	13.4
Average class sizes in primary schools	24.5	24.3	24.1	23.3	22.8	22.8
Average student-teacher ratio in post-primary schools	12.8	12.7	12.8	12.4	12.2	12.5

Note: Teacher numbers are based on allocated full-time equivalent positions. Mainstream teachers include teaching principals. Other teachers include special education teachers, English language support teachers, administrative principals, and Home School Community Liaison Coordinators, as well as any other full-time teaching staff.
Source: Government of Ireland (2024[4]), *Education Indicators for Ireland 2023*, https://www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/289186/f6c5f4cd-913e-40c2-9cc0-c48c6d566e14.pdf#page=null (accessed 19 April 2024); and Government of Ireland (2023[6]), *Education Indicators for Ireland 2022*, https://www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/246552/96fc2eb5-b7c9-4a17-afbc-de288a471b3f.pdf#page=null (accessed 3 January 2024).

While many OECD countries are faced with an ageing teaching population and significant attrition due to retirement, Ireland's teacher population is young in international comparison. In 2021, 65.2% of teachers in primary to upper secondary education were aged between 30 and 49 (the third highest proportion among OECD countries and compared to an average of 55.0%). The percentage of teachers older than 50 was very low, accounting for 17.6% of teachers in primary education (compared to 34.3% on average across OECD countries) and 26% of teachers in upper secondary education (compared to 41.7% on average across OECD countries) (OECD, 2023[7]). Yet, between 2015 and 2021, the proportion of teachers aged 25-34 shrunk by 5.7 percentage points, which suggests that the teaching population is ageing and may point to challenges in retaining new teachers (European Commission, 2023[8]).

As in nearly all OECD countries, women represent the majority of teaching staff in Ireland's schools. In primary education, women were particularly over-represented, making up 85% of teachers in 2021, compared to 82% on average across OECD countries. In post-primary education, women represented 69% of the teaching workforce, compared to the OECD averages of 67% in lower secondary schools and 59% in upper secondary schools. Although they account for the majority of the teaching workforce, women are often underrepresented in education leadership roles.

On average across OECD countries participating in the OECD Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS), women accounted for 68% of the teaching workforce in lower secondary education, but only 47% of principals (OECD, 2019[9]). Although Ireland did not participate in TALIS, national data suggest a similar pattern. According to the DoE statistics for 2022/23, women accounted for 68.4% of the overall school staff in post-primary education, but only 44.0% of principals. In primary education, women accounted for 84.5% of the overall school staff and only 66.7% of principals (Department of Education, 2023[10]).

Teachers' and school leaders' initial preparation and qualifications

Teachers' Initial Education and qualifications

Ireland's Teaching Council serves as the regulator for the teaching profession in both DEIS and non-DEIS schools. The Council is responsible for setting standards for the teaching profession, registering teachers and ensuring the quality of teachers' professional learning by accrediting ITE programmes (Department of Education, 2024[11]). According to the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2022, 90.4% of 15-year-old students' teachers in Ireland were fully certified (Figure 4.1). Although this was one of the highest proportions among OECD countries, it had declined by 8.1 percentage points since 2015 (OECD, 2023[12]). In 2022, most Irish teachers at both the primary and post-primary levels held a bachelor's degree (OECD, 2023[13]). Based on principals' reports in PISA 2022, 37.1% of teachers in Irish schools attended by 15-year-olds held at least a Master's level qualification or equivalent (ISCED 7) and 75.6% held at least a bachelor's level qualification or equivalent (ISCED 6). This was slightly below the OECD averages of 44.2% and 78.3%, respectively (Figure 4.1).

Figure 4.1. Teachers' certifications and highest qualifications (2022)

Percentage of fully certified teachers (in schools attended by 15-year-olds) and teachers' highest qualifications; based on principals' reports
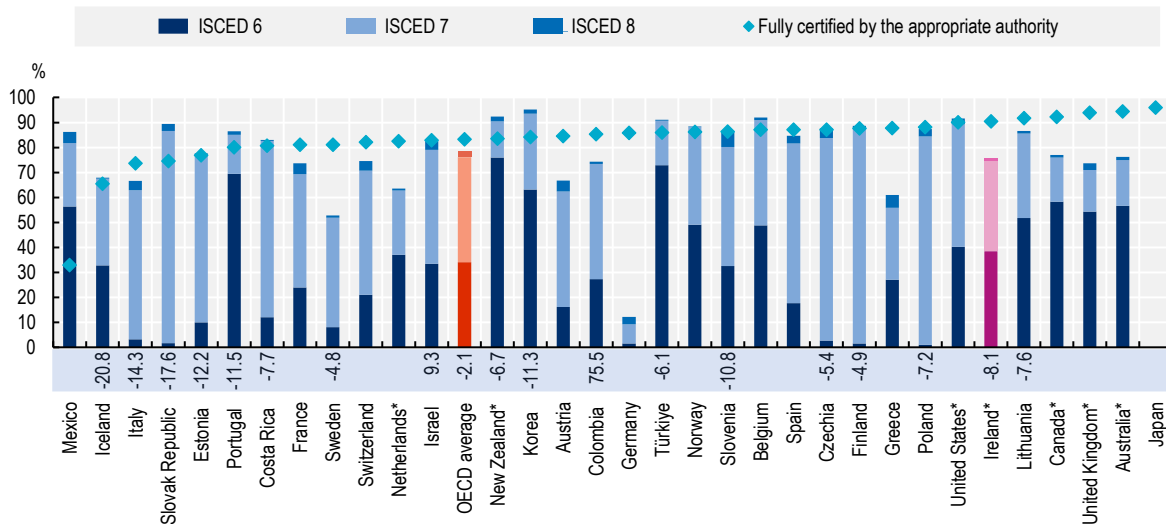
Note: * Caution is required when interpreting estimates because one or more PISA sampling standards were not met (see Reader's Guide, Annexes A2 and A4 in OECD (2023[14])). Statistically significant changes in the percentage of certified teachers in schools attended by 15-year-olds between 2015 and 2022 are shown next to the country name. Fully certified teachers are those who are licensed to teach based on standards defined by national or local institutions.
Source: OECD (2023[12]), *PISA 2022 Results (Volume II): Learning During – and From – Disruption*, Tables II.B1.5.7 and II.B1.5.9, https://doi.org/10.1787/a97db61c-en.

StatLink 🔗 https://stat.link/3bhnmk

Based on principals' reports in PISA 2018, there were no significant differences in teachers' qualifications between DEIS and non-DEIS schools at the post-primary level, i.e. in the proportion of teachers who were fully certified, held Bachelor's, Master's or Doctoral degrees (Nelis et al., 2021[15]). Likewise, at the primary level, there were no statistically significant differences in the proportion of teachers with additional qualifications between DEIS and non-DEIS schools, according to data from National Assessments of Mathematics and English Reading (NAMER) 2021 (Gilleece and Nelis, 2023[16]).

Aspiring primary and post-primary teachers can follow either a concurrent (undergraduate) or a consecutive (postgraduate) route of Initial Teacher Education. To fulfil their registration requirements, teachers can complete an accredited four-year undergraduate degree (Bachelor of Education [ISCED 6]) targeted at the respective level of education, or a two-year postgraduate degree (Professional Master of Education, PME [ISCED 7]). The PME can follow any undergraduate degree in the case of primary teachers, or any curricular subject in the case of post-primary teachers. In 2011, the duration of ITE courses was extended to allow for a longer school-based component. The duration of undergraduate ITE programmes was extended from three to four years. Postgraduate programmes were lengthened to two years, from 18 months in the case of primary-level qualifications and from 12 months for post-primary qualifications.

The entry criteria of ITE programmes can be an important factor determining the diversity of the ITE intake and – by extension – of the teaching profession. While primary school teachers in Ireland more often follow the concurrent pathway (in 2020/21 there were 1 000 students on concurrent routes and 850 on consecutive routes), post-primary teachers more often follow the consecutive pathway (OECD, 2022[17]).

Entry criteria for concurrent ITE programmes in Ireland tend to emphasise Leaving Certificate grades (with the Minister playing a role in setting minimum standards for entry into the profession at the central level). By contrast, admission criteria for consecutive programmes tend to be more diverse across programmes and institutions (sometimes considering work experience, interviews and other criteria as well as more regularly admitting students through further education routes). Given that students from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to hold the required Leaving Certificate qualifications, this can create barriers for diverse candidates aspiring to teach at the primary level and may explain why earlier studies found the profile of ITE entrants to be more diverse at the post-primary level than at the primary level (Darmody and Smyth, 2016[18]).

In addition, teachers in primary schools must also fulfil an Irish Language Requirement (ILR), i.e. they must be able to teach the Irish language. Although there are several initial teacher education programmes offering alternative pathways for prospective primary teachers without the requisite grades in Irish (e.g. the Turn to Teaching initiative at Maynooth University [NUIM] or the Teacher Education Access Programme [TEAP] at Mary Immaculate College), prospective teachers are usually required to have studied Irish up to the end of post-primary education (the Leaving Certificate Examination) and received an H4 grade.

Evaluations suggest that students in DEIS Post-primary schools were more likely to be exempt from Irish language instruction in 2012-14 (Darmody and Smyth, 2016[19]), which may have created a barrier for disadvantaged students (as well as for students of other nationalities) seeking to enter the teaching profession (The Teaching Council, n.d.[20]). Since then, the process for exemptions from Irish language instruction has been revised to be granted only in "exceptional circumstances". Nevertheless, in OECD interviews, stakeholders maintained the impression that the ILR acted as a deterrent to prospective teacher students from underrepresented groups.

Teacher induction programme

All newly appointed teachers are required to complete *Droichead*, a professional induction programme for newly qualified teachers (NQTs). Developed by the Teaching Council in consultation with the profession and launched as a pilot in 2013, *Droichead* is a school-based, non-evaluative model of teacher induction combining school support with external professional learning. Following a positive evaluation of the pilot in 2016, the programme was rolled out for all NQTs (Smyth et al., 2016[21]). The induction process runs over a period of no less than 60 school days in primary education and 200 teaching hours in post-primary education. During the induction process, schools are advised to set up Professional Support Teams (PST) that are guided and provided support by *Oide* (formerly by the National Induction Programme for Teachers [NIPT]) to engage in a series of professional conversations, training programmes, portfolio-based learning activities and observations. In addition to this school-based component, NQTs participate in termly NQT Cluster Meetings in their local Education Support Centre as part of the *Droichead* process and they engage in other professional learning activities identified in consultation with their PST (The Teaching Council, 2017[22]; OECD, 2022[17]).

School leadership positions and qualifications

School leaders[1] in Ireland are required to have a relevant teaching qualification for their level of education and, in schools with 80 students or more, at least five years of teaching experience. Although principals are not required to have undergone specific training prior to their appointment, optional professional development programmes are available both for aspiring and in-service school leaders (see below) and prior leadership experience is seen as desirable (OECD, 2022[17]). Principals are selected through an open competition by a selection committee. For most primary schools, this committee includes the chairperson of the board of management and two independent assessors appointed by the patron. Community National Schools, managed by Education and Training Boards (ETBs), have a committee consisting of an ETB

nominee, an educational expert and an independent assessor. In both scenarios, the outgoing principal is excluded from the selection process (OECD, 2020[23]; OECD, 2022[17]).

In primary schools with fewer than 169 students, principals are expected to take on teaching duties, acting as teaching principals. In larger primary schools, principals are exempt from teaching duties, serving as Administrative Principals. In DEIS schools, the threshold for the allocation of an Administrative Principal positions is lower – 136 students for DEIS Urban Band 2 schools or 113 students for DEIS Urban Band 1 schools (Department of Education, 2023[24]). In addition to the principal, school leadership teams in Ireland can be comprised of a Deputy Principal, as well as Assistant Principals I and Assistant Principals II (formerly, the Special Duties Teacher). The enrolment threshold for the appointment of an Administrative Deputy Principal exempt from teaching duties is set at 573 for non-DEIS and DEIS Urban Band 2 schools and at 500 students for DEIS Urban Band 1 schools.

Assistant Principals I and II can assume responsibilities for areas such as curriculum and learning, student support and well-being, school improvement or leadership/management and development of staff teams (Department of Education and Skills, 2018[25]). The allocation of Assistant Principal positions to both primary and post-primary schools is based on their FTE teacher allocation (e.g. at the primary level, as of 2022/23, schools with four FTE teachers receive one AP II, schools with nine FTE teachers receive three AP II, schools with 20 FTE teaching posts receive one AP I and four AP II, etc.).

Recruitment, appraisal and career progression of education staff

Following the Department of Public Expenditure's sanctioning of budget allocations, the DoE is responsible for sanctioning teacher posts in Ireland's schools and pays the salaries of teachers, as well as most school leaders and special needs assistants (see Chapter 1 for a detailed discussion) (Department of Education, 2024[11]). Each school's board of management or ETB (in the case of schools established or maintained by one of the 16 ETBs), serves as the employer of teachers, principals and other school staff. As such, they are responsible for their recruitment and dismissal, subject to centrally agreed procedures specified in the Education Act 1998,[2] relevant department circulars (Department of Education, 2019[26]), employment legislation and sectoral agreements. Recruitment panels for school staff typically involve members of the school leadership as well as the school's board of management or ETB committee.

In contrast to most OECD countries, registered teachers in Ireland are not subject to regular appraisals unless there is evidence of significant underperformance. 22 out of 26 OECD countries with a legislative framework covering teacher appraisal in lower secondary education and with available data conducted teacher appraisals regularly in 2015 (the latest year with international comparative information). 11 out of 25 OECD countries also had appraisal processes in place for teachers' promotions (OECD, 2015[27]). Although the performance of Irish principals is considered part of the school evaluation process and the Teaching Council's Codes of Professional Conduct set out expectations for teachers' professional competence, there is no specific appraisal process for them either (OECD, 2020[23]). This makes Ireland part of a minority of OECD countries (12 out of 35) that did not appraise school leaders at the time of the latest OECD international data collection in 2015 (OECD, 2015[27]).

There is no formal career ladder for classroom teachers in Irish primary or post-primary schools that would assign greater responsibilities to teachers, commensurate with their growing expertise over the course of their careers (e.g. as senior or mentor teachers). Nevertheless, teachers can assume additional responsibilities as part of their schools' leadership teams, e.g. applying for Deputy Principal or Principal positions. Teachers in DEIS Urban primary and DEIS Post-primary schools can apply to serve HSCL Coordinators. During the OECD review visit, teachers reported that this role constituted an attractive opportunity for career development and capacity building (as did working for the Teaching Council, *Oide* and other agencies).

Continuing professional learning

Providers of continuing professional learning

The DoE offers a range of professional learning models for teachers and school leaders – including several DEIS-specific programmes – through its support service *Oide* and the Education Support Centres. *Oide* (an Irish word meaning "teacher" or "tutor") was launched in September 2023, bringing together four previously separate professional learning services: the Centre for School Leadership (CSL), Junior Cycle for Teachers (JCT), the National Induction Programme for Teachers (NIPT) and the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST).

Many of *Oide's* professional learning opportunities are provided through the 21 full-time and 9 part-time Education Support Centres. The Centres are Statutory recognised Bodies funded by the Teacher Education Section of the DoE. They are organised in the National Network of Teacher/Education (Support) Centres and its umbrella organisation Education Support Centres in Ireland (ESCI) (ESCI, 2023[28]). Each Education Centre is managed by an annually elected voluntary Management Committee and serves the local education community. In total, the DoE provides annual funding exceeding EUR 60 million for professional development courses provided by *Oide* and the Education Support Centres. This includes the cost of over 360 seconded teachers providing continuing professional learning (CPL) and funding for substitute teacher cover in schools (Department of Education, 2024[11]).

The DoE also funds other groups, bodies and institutions to design, develop and deliver professional development programmes to support departmental priorities in areas like curriculum change, educational policies and strategies, school leadership or inclusive teaching. The Teacher Professional Networks (TPN) Scheme, for example, is an important source of teacher-led professional learning opportunities. Funded by the DoE, TPN allocates funding and support to Teachers' Groups and Associations (TGAs) providing continuing professional learning opportunities and peer support to post-primary teachers. To qualify for TPN funding, TGAs submit proposals for events, which should demonstrate a suitable use of support strategies and meaningful links with national priorities (TPN, 2023[29]).

The Teaching Council – in addition to its role in licensing teachers and accrediting ITE programmes – plays an important role in shaping their continuing professional learning. The Council is responsible for advising the Minister for Education on teachers' CPL, promoting engagement in CPL, conducting research and raising awareness of the benefits of teachers' professional learning (OECD, 2022[17]). The Teaching Council also developed a Code of Professional Conduct, which sets out standards and expectations for teachers' professional knowledge, skill, competence and conduct (The Teaching Council, 2016[30]). In 2016, the Teaching Council published *Cosán* (the Irish word for "pathway"), which seeks to provide a national framework guiding teachers' continuing professional learning (The Teaching Council, 2016[31]). The Teaching Council aims to implement the framework across the system by 2027, based on an Action Plan developed jointly with the DoE (The Teaching Council and Department of Education, 2016[32]).

The National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) of the DoE also plays a role in building the capacity of school staff. In addition to casework services, NEPS offers support and development services for school staff, including consultations and professional learning events and presentations. The focus of its offer is the promotion of inclusive practices in schools, ensuring a continuum of support for students and building capability to provide universal, evidence-based approaches and early interventions to promote inclusion, participation and well-being. One of the Service's flagship professional learning offerings is the Incredible Years Teacher Classroom Management (IYTCM)Programme, which focuses on strengthening teacher classroom management strategies, improving classroom climate, building students' socio-emotional skills and improving collaborative home-school relationships (Box 4.1 below).

Several quality assurance efforts are underway to support the effectiveness of the professional development offer. In 2023, the Educational Research Centre (ERC) published a framework intended to

support the evaluation of different forms of formal professional learning, either by providers or external evaluators (Gilleece, Surdey and Rawdon, 2023[33]). In parallel, the DoE has developed an internal framework (the Design and Quality Assurance Process) to inform the design and quality assurance process of learning opportunities provided by its support services (Gilleece, Surdey and Rawdon, 2023[33]). Meanwhile, *Oide* has engaged in its own efforts to ensure the quality of its professional learning offer. According to *Oide*, all summer courses include a teacher evaluation at the end and *Oide* regularly reviews the quality of in-person training courses at the primary and post-primary levels, as well as a sample of online courses. In addition, the DoE Inspectorate evaluates the design and facilitation of a sample of online and in-person professional learning courses each year. All NEPS Support and Development for school staff is informed by evaluations with teachers and educational psychologists that are carried out upon completion of the learning events.

Professional learning opportunities for teachers

Although teachers in Ireland are not required to engage in individual professional development activities beyond the completion of the *Droichead* induction programme, many continue to engage in "supplementary" or "elective" professional learning throughout their careers (see below) (OECD, 2020[23]). Teachers are responsible for selecting the professional learning opportunities that they want to pursue and are provided with guidance on the DoE priorities. Many of the individual professional learning opportunities provided by *Oide* (e.g. on newly introduced subject areas) take the form of day-long courses delivered during school hours or two-hour workshops after school hours, provided by seconded teachers in an Education Support Centre. If teachers' participation in workshops or seminars (e.g. related to new curriculum specifications or changes to education policy) is considered necessary during school hours, teachers can obtain approval for paid substitution (OECD, 2020[34]).

Primary school teachers can take part in courses offered by *Oide* and other approved providers through the National Network of Teacher/Education (Support) Centres. There is no charge for the learning events provided by *Oide*. In addition, the Teacher Education Section offers a summer course programme that dates back to the 1970s and around 38 000 teachers completed a summer course in 2022. Courses typically last five days and participating primary teachers can receive up to five days of additional Extra Personal Vacation (EPV) Leave for their attendance (OECD, 2022[17]), provided that the courses are approved by the DoE, on the recommendation of the Inspectorate. Teachers can also follow courses by private providers, many of which are offered online and at varying cost to the teacher.

Since 2011, teachers have been required to engage in a range of "essential activities" outside their regular timetable (including school planning, staff meetings or training) for 36 hours at the primary level and 33 hours per year at the post-primary level (Department of Education and Skills, 2011[35]; Department of Education and Skills, 2014[36]). The school management can decide on the use of most of these "Croke Park" hours, but teachers have discretion over the use of five hours per year at the post-primary level and ten hours at the primary level, which can be used for additional professional learning activities, subject to the school management's approval.

Besides individual professional learning activities, schools may avail of school-wide training, for example, to support the implementation of large-scale reforms. Principals in primary and post-primary schools may facilitate school-wide learning by pooling "Croke Park" hours or – in exceptional cases where the DoE issues a corresponding circular – school closures are approved to facilitate school-wide professional development. In recent years, these requests were granted at the primary level in both the 2023/24 and 2024/25 school years to avail of sustained in-school support for the introduction of the new Primary Mathematics Curriculum (Circular 0039/2023). At the post-primary level, since the implementation of Junior Cycle in 2014, annual circulars have permitted two school closure days per academic year independent of schools' DEIS status (one for subject-specific cluster work and one for whole-school planning) (Circular 0028/2023). In addition, full-time teachers were granted 22 hours of professional development time per

year (reducing the average weekly teaching time by 40 minutes), with corresponding pro-rata entitlements for part-time teachers. This was made possible through the allocation of an additional 670 FTE posts to schools (OECD, 2020[23]).

Professional learning for school leaders

It is not mandatory for school leaders in Ireland to engage in leadership training prior to assuming their positions, but aspiring school leaders can prepare themselves with a variety of professional learning programmes. Many aspiring school leaders, for example, apply to enrol in an 18-month part-time Postgraduate Diploma in School Leadership (at the master's equivalent "Level 9"). The programme is offered jointly by the University of Limerick, the University of Galway and University College Dublin. In 2023, the DoE provided partial funding for 300 places, leaving accepted candidates to cover the remaining tuition fees of EUR 2 000 for the course.

In addition, *Oide* offers multiple training programmes focused on school leadership with the goal of providing continuing professional learning support throughout school leaders' careers. This includes an 18-month professional learning programme and access to trained mentors for newly appointed principals (*Misneach*), coaching for established school leaders and cluster support for school leadership teams (*Forbairt*), as well as a year-long professional learning programme for deputy principals (*Tánaiste*) and "middle leaders", i.e. Assistant Principals I or II (*Comhar*).

The DoE also supports the provision of professional learning through both the Irish Primary Principals' Network (IPPN) and the National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals (NAPD). In addition to providing formal training, the two national professional associations (IPPN and NAPD) provide a platform for school leaders to collaborate and engage in horizontal exchange and peer learning (e.g. at conferences).

DEIS-specific professional learning support

Teachers and school leaders in DEIS schools benefit from a variety of DEIS-specific seminars and workshops (e.g. primary school principals and deputy principals participating in the *Misneach* and *Tánaiste* programmes can access professional learning on the DEIS action planning process). Teachers in DEIS schools also have priority access to a number of *Oide's* continuing professional learning programmes. This includes the intensive numeracy and literacy programmes First Steps, Reading Recovery and Maths Recovery, the latter of which are exclusive to DEIS Urban Band 1 and DEIS Urban Band 2 schools. Other professional learning programmes provided by NEPS and targeted at DEIS schools are the FRIENDS Resilience programmes and the Incredible Years Programme, which focus on classroom management and fostering students' socio-emotional skills (see Box 4.1 and a more detailed discussion in Chapter 5).

Box 4.1. Examples of professional learning programmes targeted at DEIS schools in Ireland

The Incredible Years Teacher Classroom Management Programme

The Incredible Years Teacher Classroom Management (IYTCM) Programme was designed to train teachers to employ evidence-based strategies to disrupt patterns of negative behaviour and to promote pro-social behaviour in children between the ages of 4 and 8 although this was subsequently expanded to include older children. Developed in the United States, the programme in Ireland involves five to six full-day workshops delivered over the course of three months. In 2022/23, the IYTCM Programme was delivered 26 times in Ireland, to a total of 513 teachers, based on internal attendance records. While the Programme is targeted at teachers in DEIS schools, two non-DEIS schools also benefited from the training. For the 2023/24 school year, NEPS estimates the cost of delivery for the IYTCM Programme to be EUR 1 400 per teacher (EUR 1 200 of which accounts for the cost of substitution).

The Programme focuses on improving teachers' classroom management through a range of evidence-based practices, including by cultivating positive relationships with students and parents, providing children with attention, encouragement and praise, motivating children through incentives and creating behaviour plans. Between workshops, teachers are encouraged to practice their newly acquired skills and techniques.

A systematic review of seven quantitative IYTCM evaluations from England (United Kingdom), Limerick (Ireland), Jamaica, the United States and Wales (United Kingdom) found that the programme – on average – improved teachers' use of effective classroom management strategies and reduced conduct problems among high-risk children. By contrast, there were no improvements in children's prosocial behaviour (Nye, Melendez-Torres and Gardner, 2019[37]).

The randomised controlled trials of the Limerick IYTCM Programme included in the meta-analysis largely found improvements in teachers self-reported use of classroom management techniques (e.g. fewer warnings and threats, less shouting and more modelling of good behaviour) while findings on observed changes in teacher and student behaviour were less conclusive (Hickey et al., 2017[38]; McGilloway et al., 2010[39]; Leckey et al., 2016[40]). A more recent evaluation (without a control group), focusing on the Programme's impact on teachers' psychological outcomes in Limerick found a positive change in teachers' reported self-efficacy, well-being and multiple dimensions related to burnout (Kennedy et al., 2021[41]).

The FRIENDS Resilience programmes

The FRIENDS Resilience programmes are a set of evidence-based anxiety reduction and resilience building programmes, which teach students coping strategies to manage anxiety and cope with challenges and stresses in their daily lives. The programmes are based on cognitive behavioural therapy and designed to be delivered by clinicians as well as appropriately trained and supported teachers in schools. Since 2014, NEPS has systematically offered training in the FRIENDS programmes to Irish teachers, responding to schools' increased concern about students' anxiety. Since 2017/18, more than 2 300 teachers in DEIS schools have received training in the FRIENDS programme. Prior to the programmes' roll-out, NEPS conducted a randomised control trial (RCT) involving NEPS-trained teachers delivering the programmes to over 700 primary students in 2013/14. Students who participated showed a significant reduction in anxiety as well as improvements in their coping skills, school connectedness and self-concept (Ruttledge et al., 2016[42]). A 2012 RCT of the programme's implementation in Irish post-primary schools found positive effects on reducing overall anxiety and demonstrated its potential for addressing school adjustment difficulties and anxiety associated with the transition to post-primary school (Rodgers and Dunsmuir, 2015[43]).

Source: Department of Education (2023[44]), *The Incredible Years Teacher Classroom Management (TCM) Programme*, https://assets.gov.ie/41215/90a7cb8701ab475cada4a20860dbcd73.pdf (accessed on 22 February 2024); Department of Education (2023[45]), *The Friends Programmes*, https://assets.gov.ie/41216/fc1f9f7ae6df4749924eea240b9f3b98.pdf (accessed on 26 April 2024).

Other school staff and administrative support

On top of the additional teaching staff in DEIS Urban Band 1 schools, some schools – independent of their DEIS status – benefit from additional non-teaching staff and administrative support intended to strengthen their capacity to support students at risk of educational disadvantage. School secretaries and caretakers are recruited and employed by individual schools and funded by their board of management or ETB.[3] As of 2022, salary scales for newly appointed school secretaries in primary and post-primary schools are determined at the national level and paid directly by the DoE, while in-service school secretaries are given

the option to join this scheme (Department of Education, 2022[46]). Most smaller schools do not have a full-time school secretary or caretaker.

DEIS schools also benefit from HSCL Coordinators who support disadvantaged students by promoting active co-operation between their homes, the school and relevant community agencies (see Chapters 1 and 5). HSCL Coordinators seek to help parents or guardians to support their children and become involved in their education, mainly through home visits but also by organising classes for parents or guardians and other family activities in schools. Full-time HSCL Coordinators are allocated to all DEIS Urban primary and DEIS Post-primary schools (but not to DEIS Rural schools), although, in some cases, HSCL positions are shared between clusters of two or three DEIS schools (Department of Education, 2023[24]). HSCL Coordinators are appointed for a period of five years and they are required to be registered teachers at the school(s) where they will serve.

The 2017 DEIS Plan introduced additional support measures aimed at strengthening schools' capacity, including the allocation of a dedicated career guidance counsellors to support students in DEIS Post-primary schools (see Chapters 1 and 5) (Department of Education and Skills, 2017[3]). DEIS schools also receive support through the SCP and their staff, who cover schools in a cluster to support their students outside of school, in close contact with the HSCL Coordinators.

Following the financial crisis of 2008 and the subsequent economic downturn, schools in Ireland saw cuts to several support services. Some of them have been restored in the intervening years or counterbalanced by the expansion of HSCL and other support services, including those focused on special educational needs. Although core tenets of DEIS – notably the DEIS grant rates – were not affected by the cuts, DEIS Rural schools lost access to HSCL Coordinators with the introduction of the National Recovery Plan 2011-2014. While the 2012 Budget entailed the removal of funding for 700 guidance counsellor positions (previously allocated for each 500 students in post-primary schools) their allocation has been restored beginning with the 2017/18 school year. In 2023/24, 500 students would be allocated 0.86 FTE guidance counsellors in a non-DEIS post-primary school and 2.01 FTE in a DEIS school.

As part of a move away from the separate provision of support for Roma and Traveller students in 2011, the DoE also removed 40 posts dedicated to supporting families and students of Traveller and Roma communities, as well as the dedicated Resource Teachers for Travellers, which had previously been allocated to primary schools with at least 14 Traveller students. These supports had been highly valued by the community, particularly since only about two thirds of Traveller and Roma students attend DEIS schools, according to stakeholder organisations. The resources for the Resource Teachers for Travellers were channelled to increase the amount of the capitation grant for Traveller and Roma students by EUR 75 at the primary level and EUR 213.50 at the post-primary level (Department of Education, 2024[11]).

Strengths

DEIS schools in the most disadvantaged contexts benefit from additional teaching and leadership resources

Teachers in many DEIS schools are faced with extraordinary challenges in meeting the diverse needs of students with high levels of educational disadvantage. Under the right conditions, smaller classes can help teachers devote more attention to individual students and employ a wider range of pedagogical approaches to meet their needs. While the overall benefits of class size reductions are contested – particularly when compared with similarly costly interventions (OECD, 2018[47]; Krueger, 2003[48]) – there is strong empirical evidence to suggest that disadvantaged students, particularly at lower levels of education, benefit the most from teaching in smaller classes. Studies from large-scale experiments such as the Tennessee's Student Teacher Achievement Ratio (STAR) suggest that reducing class sizes from kindergarten through third grade to around 15 students can have a positive effect on

achievement and some longer-term outcomes, particularly for students from disadvantaged backgrounds (Chetty et al., 2011[49]; Dynarski, Hyman and Schanzenbach, 2013[50]).

In Ireland, the most disadvantaged primary schools in urban areas (DEIS Urban Band 1) benefit from reduced class sizes (see Chapter 1). While the regular class size in mainstream primary schools is set at 23:1 for the 2023/24 school year, DEIS Urban Band 1 schools have a class size of 17:1 in junior schools, 19:1 in vertical schools (schools with junior and senior classes) and 21:1 in senior schools (Department of Education, 2023[24]). Although other DEIS primary schools (DEIS Urban Band 2 and DEIS Rural) do not benefit from these class size reductions, data from Ireland's 2021 NAMER assessment of primary school students suggest that class sizes in DEIS Urban Band 2 primary schools were lower than those in non-DEIS urban schools for second class students (23.1 vs. 26.3 students), albeit not for sixth class students (26.4 vs. 26.9 students) (Gilleece and Nelis, 2023[16]).

Although DEIS Post-primary schools do not benefit from class size reductions either, PISA 2022 data suggest that disadvantaged post-primary schools in Ireland tend to have slightly lower student-teacher ratios as well. Based on principals' reports, there were on average 12.4 students per teacher in Irish schools attended by 15-year-olds – slightly below the OECD average of 13.2 (Figure 4.2). Since 2018, the student-teacher ratio has decreased slightly by 0.4. In 2022, student-teacher ratios were slightly lower in disadvantaged schools than in advantaged schools (11.6 compared to 12.7 students per teacher).[4] A similar pattern is observed on average across OECD countries, although a number of countries (including Belgium, Estonia, France, Japan, Latvia, Spain and Sweden), have significantly more favourable student-teacher ratios in disadvantaged schools (OECD, 2023[12]).

Figure 4.2. Student-teacher ratio, by schools' socio-economic profile (2022)

Number of students per teacher, based on principals' reports
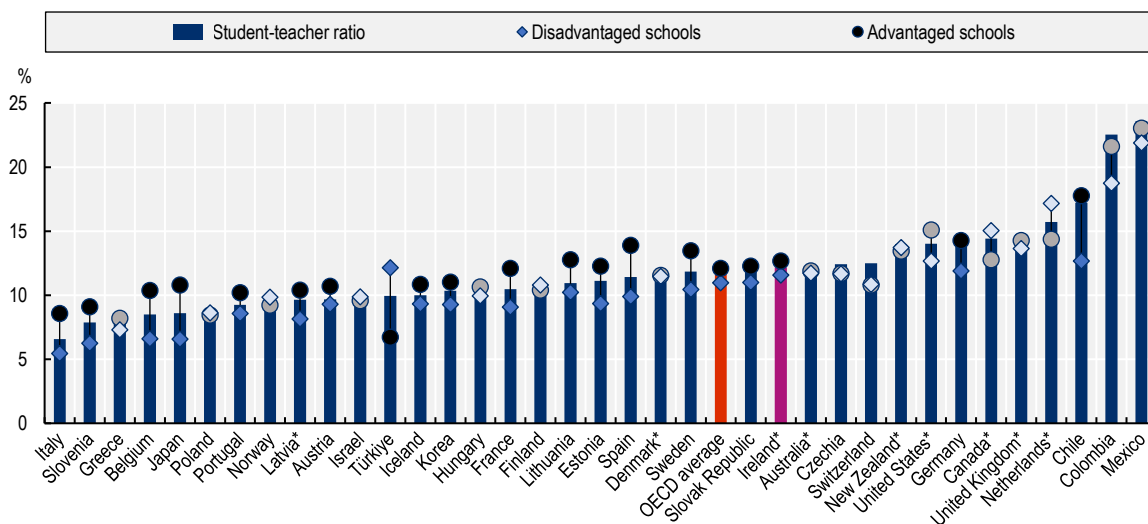
Note: * Caution is required when interpreting estimates because one or more PISA sampling standards were not met (see Reader's Guide, Annexes A2 and A4 in OECD (2023[14])). Analyses are restricted to schools with the modal ISCED level for 15-year-old students. Results may thus differ from those estimated on the entire sample of 15-year-old students. Statistically significant differences are shown in a darker tone.
Source: OECD (2023[12]), *PISA 2022 Results (Volume II): Learning During – and From – Disruption*, Table II.B1.5.11., https://doi.org/10.1787/a97db61c-en.

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The reduced class sizes in DEIS Urban Band 1 schools underline Ireland's commitment to allocating resources to alleviate educational disadvantage. In interviews with the OECD review team, teachers in DEIS Urban Band 1 schools reported that the class size reductions made a significant difference to their ability to support all learners. As much as DEIS Urban Band 1 schools expressed their content with smaller class sizes, other DEIS schools that did not benefit from this support (including small rural schools) expressed their difficulty in providing differentiated instruction in large classes. Particularly in small rural schools, this issue can be compounded by the necessity for multi-grade teaching.

ITE provides teachers with relevant preparation to support disadvantaged students and to address diverse needs

High-quality initial teacher education (ITE) programmes aim to equip teachers with both the knowledge and skills they need to make appropriate professional judgements and deliver effective instruction (OECD, 2019[51]; Brussino, 2021[52]). Although ITE programmes mark the beginning and not the end of teachers' professional learning journeys, they can lay a strong foundation on which teachers can continue building throughout their careers. To do so effectively, ITE programmes need to be regularly updated to reflect major developments affecting the reality of teaching and learning.

Ireland, along with many OECD countries, is placing an increasing emphasis on inclusive education and the provision of differentiated support to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse student population (The Teaching Council, 2020[53]). At the same time, teachers are faced with evolving responsibilities and an increasing expectation to act as leaders, e.g. by assuming responsibilities beyond the classroom, including for school improvement or the professional development of their peers (Wenner and Campbell, 2017[54]). Teachers are also increasingly expected to take a holistic approach to students' education that considers both their learning and well-being. The 2023 ITE Policy Statement states that "[t]he wellbeing of all the children and young people who attend our schools must be at the forefront of teachers' work […]" (Department of Education, 2023, p. 18[55]). The perceived rise in expectations has been a reported source of stress among teachers (Morgan and Craith, 2015[56]), which underlines the importance of a well-designed ITE system.

The DoE has undertaken clear efforts to ensure that ITE programmes reflect these developments and continue preparing teachers to meet evolving expectations and address diverse students' needs. The Teaching Council, in co-operation with the DoE, is responsible for accrediting ITE programmes and developing criteria to guide its review process. Its 2011 "Criteria and Guidelines for Programme Providers", included inclusive education (covering special education, multiculturalism and disadvantage) as a mandatory element for ITE programmes to cover (The Teaching Council, 2011[57]; Brussino, 2021[52]).

A 2019 report commissioned by the NCSE found that ITE programmes – while providing a broad foundation for student teachers to develop the attitudes, knowledge and skills required to cater effectively for the inclusion of all learners – were sometimes inconsistent in how inclusive practices were embedded across the ITE curriculum (Hick et al., 2020[58]). This difficulty appears to have been addressed in the updated ITE standards (*Céim*) released by the Teaching Council 2020 and based on which all ITE programmes are currently reviewed for re-accreditation. The updated ITE standards refer to inclusive education as one of the seven core elements required to "underpin all aspects of programmes of ITE" (The Teaching Council, 2020, p. 14[53]).

Inclusive education is defined in *Céim* to include the "fostering of appropriate learning environments, including digital ones, that support the development of student teachers' ability to provide for the learning needs of all pupils […]" (The Teaching Council, 2020, p. 14[53]). The Teaching Council defines these learning needs widely to cover both additional learning needs arising e.g. from autism, dyslexia or dyspraxia, as well as "learning needs associated with diverse linguistic, socioeconomic, cultural and ethnic (including Traveller community, Roma) backgrounds" (The Teaching Council, 2020, p. 4[53]). In addition, as part of its "Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy 2017-21", the DoE had requested the Teaching

Council examine how ITE programmes dealt with intercultural, anti-racism and diversity (Department of Justice and Equality, 2017[59]).

Providing teachers with opportunities to practise their knowledge and skills in a classroom setting is a core feature of successful ITE programmes (OECD, 2019[60]). Ireland's Teaching Council considers school placements as "the fulcrum of teacher education" and requires the school-based element of ITE programmes to include at least 200 hours of direct teaching experience in a "variety of school contexts to reflect the socio-economic and cultural mix of society" (The Teaching Council, 2020, p. 17[53]). The *Céim* guidelines already require teachers to "demonstrate an understanding of inclusive education as applicable to" whichever school they are placed in as part of a portfolio-based learning process (*Taisce*) (The Teaching Council, 2020, p. 18[53]). In addition, the DoE has committed itself to working towards requiring all student teachers at primary and post-primary levels to spend at least one placement in a special education setting and to improve the availability of data to ensure the diversity of school placement settings, including DEIS schools (Department of Education, 2023[55]).

Although teachers interviewed during the OECD review visit emphasised the limitations of ITE and underlined the steep learning curves they experienced during their first years in service, the OECD review team formed the impression that teachers – on the whole – felt their ITE programmes provided them with a strong position to start their careers. Ireland's emphasis on inclusive education and supporting students at risk of educational disadvantage is also borne out by international comparative data. In PISA 2022, Irish schools stood out for their commitment to providing additional support for disadvantaged students and engaging in practices that recognise and support students' diversity. Based on principals' reports, 62.5% of 15-year-old students had teachers who provided additional support for students from disadvantaged backgrounds at least once a week (compared to 46.8% on average across OECD countries). Furthermore, 45.3% of students were taught to be inclusive of others with different backgrounds (compared to 41.6% on average across OECD countries) (OECD, 2023[61]).

Many formal professional learning opportunities are provided free of charge and the newly consolidated support service has the potential to further improve their accessibility

Even the most effective initial teacher education programme needs to be complemented with a strong system of continuing professional learning to ensure that teachers can continue to update their knowledge and skills once they have entered the classroom. As described above, support services funded by the DoE provide a wide range of free professional learning opportunities for teachers and (aspiring) school leaders. Although the professional learning offer is focused on traditional learning formats (see the discussion further below), the general accessibility of courses and the use of whole-school training days are reflected in a comparatively wide-spread participation among teachers. As of yet, no national statistics are available on the overall participation of individual teachers in CPL, beyond self-reports in the context of NAMER or international surveys like PISA. In 2022, however, 1 672 primary schools (52% of 3 231) received school-level support from a PDST[5] advisor (Government of Ireland, 2024[4]).

In PISA 2022, principals of 15-year-old students in Ireland reported on average that 64.6% of their teachers had taken part in a formal professional development programme during the last three months (Figure 4.3). This was significantly above the OECD average of 52.3%, even though some high-performing countries, like Australia (76.2%), Canada (67.3%), the United Kingdom (80.9%) and Singapore (86.1%), had even higher attendance rates (OECD, 2023[61]). Furthermore, almost all Irish principals reported having developed a professional development plan for their school (97%, compared to 94% on average across OECD countries) and the majority (69%, compared to 61% on average across OECD countries) reported regularly taking actions to ensure that teachers take responsibility for improving their teaching skills (OECD, 2023[12]).

Figure 4.3. Teachers' participation in professional development activities (2022)

Proportion of 15-year-old students' teachers who had attended a programme of professional development during the previous three months; based on principals' reports
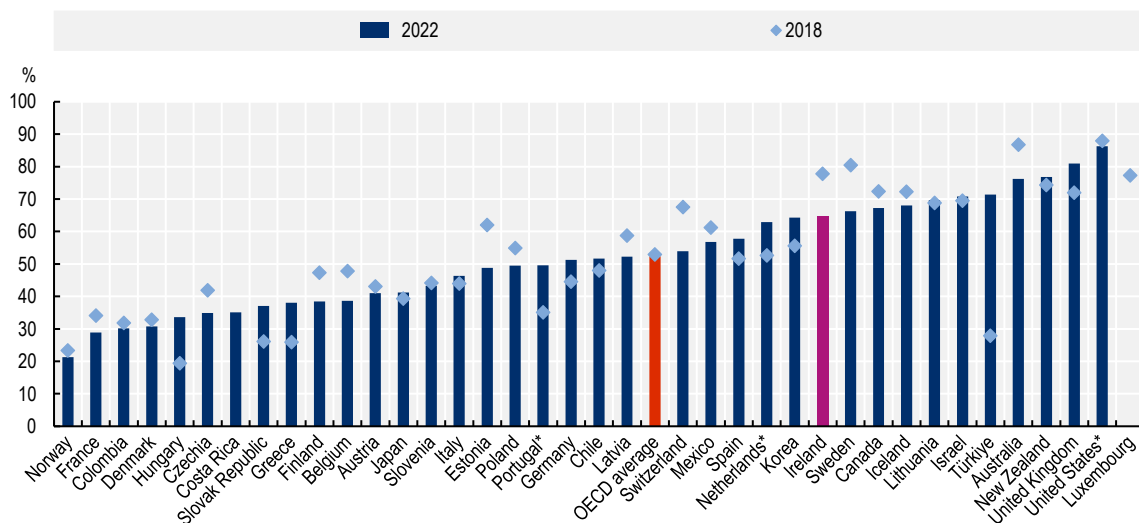
Note: * Caution is required when interpreting estimates because one or more PISA sampling standards were not met (see Reader's Guide, Annexes A2 and A4 in OECD (2023[14])).
Source: Authors' analysis based on OECD (2023[61]), PISA 2022 Database; and OECD (2019[62]), *PISA 2018 Results (Volume II): Where All Students Can Succeed*, Table II.B1.5.6, https://doi.org/10.1787/b5fd1b8f-en.

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A 2020 OECD review of Ireland's Senior Cycle described its professional learning system as fragmented and dispersed with responsibilities for professional learning divided across four services (OECD, 2020[34]). The introduction of *Oide* in 2023 constitutes an important consolidation of professional support services, which has the potential to further facilitate teachers' and school leaders' access to relevant professional learning opportunities.

The professional learning offer is responsive to the local needs of teachers and of DEIS schools

Many of *Oide's* professional learning opportunities are offered through local Education Support Centres, which seek to adapt their professional learning offer to the needs of the local education workforce. In interviews with teachers and school leaders, the OECD review team formed the impression that the Education Support Centres provided convenient access to formal professional development courses and provided relevant training adapted to their needs. Several additional mechanisms are intended to ensure that the centrally-provided professional learning offer is responsive to schools' needs. For example, link inspectors are nominated by the Inspectorate to support *Oide* during the scoping, design and review of new professional learning programmes and to inform them of training needs that they observe in the field.

In addition to external training, a variety of in-school professional learning opportunities are available to schools, allowing them to receive contextualised support directly adapted to their needs. This is reflected in PISA 2022, where most principals of Irish post-primary schools reported bringing in external expertise to provide and enrich training for their teachers (OECD, 2023[12]). 95.7% of Irish principals reported that their school invited specialists to conduct in-service training for teachers (significantly above the OECD average of 80.4%) and 94.8% reported that their school organises in-service workshops that deal with

specific issues the school faces (above the OECD average of 82.8%) (OECD, 2023[61]). Some post-primary schools also encourage teachers who engage in external training to act as multipliers and organise in-house professional development for their colleagues to share their insights and to model new teaching strategies (Department of Education, 2022[63]).

Oide provides additional professional learning opportunities for teachers and school leaders in DEIS schools, focusing on issues that are specific to their context. The DoE Social Inclusion Unit is funding two positions in *Oide*, which are focused on providing professional learning in relation to DEIS and inclusion. In addition, at the primary level, DEIS schools have priority access to the intensive Reading Recovery and Maths Recovery programmes (see Chapter 5), which assist teachers in using evidence-based intervention strategies for children struggling with literacy and numeracy. Subject to availability, *Oide* also provides Reading Recovery training to non-DEIS schools with the highest levels of need and 43% of the schools that received the training in 2023 had non-DEIS status. Maths Recovery training is exclusively offered to DEIS Urban Band 1 and 2 schools.

Oide's leadership training programmes (*Misneach*, *Tánaiste*, *Forbairt* and *Comhar*) also include specialised modules on leading teaching and learning in DEIS schools. School leaders who engaged in these programmes and were interviewed during the OECD review visit appeared to consider them well-tailored to the DEIS context. In a 2023 survey, 54% of principals in post-primary schools that received DEIS status during the programme's 2022 expansion reported having already completed the *Misneach* programme. Among primary principals, the proportion was even higher, ranging from 63% to 70% across the different DEIS Bands (Nelis, Gilleece and Dinh, 2024[64]).

DEIS schools also have priority access to *Oide*'s team of Professional Learning Leaders (PLLs). Schools can apply for the PLLs' support through a central database listing the top three priority areas in which they require support. PLLs with the requisite expertise are then assigned to work with the schools and tend to visit a given school between two to six times, working on specific areas of learning, teaching, assessment, action planning or school leadership based on the school's identified needs (including issues like anti-bullying and well-being, use of digital resources and STEM teaching). PLLs can work with a school's entire staff as well as individual teachers or school leaders and they can model effective pedagogical approaches in the classroom. During the 2022/23 school year, DEIS schools received 47% of this bespoke in-school support at the post-primary level and 39% of the bespoke in-school support provided at the primary level.

The Inspectorate's approach to the evaluation of action planning in DEIS schools emphasises capacity building

Schools in the DEIS programme are subject to the Inspectorate's full range of inspection models, ranging from incidental, unannounced one-day inspections to more intensive whole-school evaluations and follow-through inspections focused on the implementation of recommendations made in previous inspection reports (see also Chapter 6) (Department of Education, 2022[65]; Department of Education, 2022[66]). In addition, inspections of DEIS schools place a strong emphasis on the schools' action planning process, which guides the schools' improvement and capacity building. The action planning process is underpinned by the self-evaluation process, which was introduced in all Irish schools in 2012/13 and consists of six steps: 1. Identifying a focus area; 2. Gathering evidence; 3. Analysing and making judgements; 4. Writing and sharing the report and improvement plan; 5. Putting the improvement plan into action; 6. Monitoring actions and evaluating their impact (see Chapter 6) (Department of Education, 2022[63]). Inspectors are supporting DEIS schools in this process and have completed 709 inspection and advisory visits in DEIS primary schools and 304 in DEIS Post-primary schools in 2022/23 (corresponding to about 38% of all inspection activities of that year). In addition, the Inspectorate is in the process of developing updated guidelines to support the action planning process in DEIS schools, which it will revise based on feedback from schools.

As described in more detail in Chapter 6, DEIS schools develop a specific version of the three-year improvement plans, called the DEIS Action Plan. The Action Plans emphasise the effective use of DEIS supports (including the DEIS grant) to improve the outcomes and experiences of students who are identified as most at risk of educational disadvantage. The plan includes targets and strategies related to the DEIS themes: attendance, retention, transitions, literacy, numeracy, examination attainment (only in post-primary schools), partnership with parents and others. Since 2017, schools have also been asked to include strategies and targets related to three integrated themes (leadership, well-being and continuing professional learning) in their Action Plans (Department of Education, 2022[63]).

One of the inspection models used in the external evaluation of DEIS schools (the Evaluation of Action Planning for Improvement in DEIS Schools) focuses on how schools devise, implement and monitor their DEIS Action Plan and its impact on teaching practices, students' learning experiences and outcomes with respect to the DEIS themes (Department of Education, 2022[65]; Department of Education, 2022[66]). Principals are advised to nominate a DEIS coordinator (a role often assumed by a member of the school leadership team) and a DEIS planning team to lead the DEIS action planning process and monitor the school's progress towards its goals in collaboration with the senior management team (Department of Education, 2022[63]).

The action planning process can enhance schools' capacity both indirectly – by strengthening the school management's approach to collaborative improvement planning – and directly – by providing schools with evaluative feedback on their use of CPL. Since 2017, DEIS schools have been required to cover their approach to CPL as a stand-alone theme in their Action Plan. This marked an important shift that further emphasises the critical role of capacity building in helping schools achieve their improvement objectives. An evaluation of 78 inspections carried out between 2017 and March 2020[6] found that "almost half of post-primary and almost all of the primary evaluation reports" remarked on the schools' provision of CPL (Department of Education, 2022, p. 45[63]).

There appears to remain scope for improvement in the effective use of CPL in DEIS schools, particularly at the post-primary level. Inspection reports suggest that some school leaders require further work in using CPL to bring about effective change at the whole-school and classroom levels in line with their schools' Action Plans. The Inspectorate also remarked on the need for further guidance on the use of assessment data to evaluate the impact of different teaching approaches (Department of Education, 2022[63]).

Nevertheless, the inspection reports underlined that investments in CPL clearly paid off and complimented the high teaching quality in primary schools with a strong professional learning culture. Inspectors also noted that continuing professional learning – where it was embedded in teachers' professional practice – was generally well-aligned with the DEIS themes (Department of Education, 2022[63]). To ensure that schools can draw on CPL to address the challenges observed during school inspection visits, the Inspectorate also has a history of working closely with Ireland's professional development services and deploys link inspectors to work with *Oide*.

The increasing emphasis on informal learning and communities of practice can strengthen capacity among DEIS schools and beyond

The most effective forms of professional learning tend to be those that are integrated into teachers' everyday work and involve collecting, evaluating and acting on feedback to modify their practice (Boeskens, Nusche and Yurita, 2020[67]). Communities of practice (CoPs) or professional learning communities (PLCs) can provide teachers with a safe environment to expose themselves to new practices, to challenge their tacit assumptions, and to engage in active discussions with their peers' on what works and why (Timperley et al., 2007[68]). Giving teachers the space for collaborative learning can thereby set them on a course of continuous improvement (Ronfeldt et al., 2015[69]). In addition, PISA data suggest that teachers engaging in frequent collaboration have significantly higher levels of professional satisfaction (Mostafa and Pál, 2018[70]).

Ireland recognises the potential of informal learning and teachers are increasingly complementing their traditional training with active engagement in communities of practice (CoPs). *Oide* has reported that they are actively promoting the formation of professional CoPs and are building them into their professional learning frameworks. Although the practice does not appear to be universal, some of the 16 ETBs are operating CoPs on specific topics or for teachers of specific subjects. These constitute a promising avenue to strengthen teachers' capacity through horizontal collaboration, particularly if they were to receive more systematic support.

The DoE has also established CoPs for DEIS school leaders, in collaboration with the Inspectorate and the Education Support Centres. This initiative is aimed at alleviating capacity challenges identified by the Inspectorate in a 2022 report (Department of Education, 2022[63]). The CoPs will provide a forum for DEIS leaders to share and build on each other's knowledge, practices and experience, taking a coaching approach to address issues as they arise. Since 2023, CoPs have been established in 11 Education Support Centres and *Oide* is training facilitators to run CoP meetings. One of the schools (non-DEIS primary) visited by the OECD review team reported that their principals and deputy principals benefited from peer-learning in local support groups (and through informal private channels of communication). These informal practices could be built on and supported explicitly to create an even stronger culture of peer-learning, from which all schools can benefit.

Challenges

Staff shortages across a range of positions create a challenging context for both DEIS and non-DEIS schools to meet learners' needs

Over the past few years, Ireland has experienced staff shortages across a range of positions in and around schools and data suggest that students in disadvantaged schools and areas may suffer the most from teacher shortages. Responsibility for the recruitment of teachers in Ireland lies with schools' boards of management and the DoE does not collect school-level or regional-level data on teacher vacancies. Although the DoE has undertaken efforts to predict the demand for teachers based on demographic projections, as part of its Teacher Supply Action Plan (Department of Education, 2020[71]) and supporting the supply of teachers is one of the DoE priorities (Department of Education, 2024[11]), there is currently no regular monitoring of indicators related to teacher shortages at the central level. Nevertheless, national and international survey data point to significant shortages experienced in Ireland's schools.

According to a survey by the Association of Secondary Teachers in Ireland (ASTI), 81% of school leaders in post-primary schools had to employ unqualified teachers, 48% had to increase teachers' workload and 34% re-assigned special education teachers to mainstream classes in the 2022/23 school year as a result of shortages (ASTI, 2023[72]). In PISA 2022, 22.7% of 15-year-old students in Ireland attended a school whose principal reported that their capacity to provide instruction was hindered a lot by a lack of teaching staff and another 45.1% reported that it was hindered to some extent. This was significantly above the OECD averages of 13.0% and 33.7%, respectively, and only surpassed by perceived shortages in Belgium, Estonia, Germany and the Netherlands (OECD, 2023[12]). The percentage of 15-year-old students whose instruction was reportedly hindered (to some extent or a lot) by a lack of teachers has also increased markedly, by 23.0 percentage points, since 2018 (ibid.).

Teacher shortages in Ireland, at least at the post-primary level, particularly affect students in disadvantaged schools and areas. In a survey of Irish primary school principals carried out with NAMER 2021, teacher recruitment difficulties were widely reported in almost 50% of both DEIS and non-DEIS schools, while retention issues were reported by 17%-23% of principals with no significant differences between DEIS and non-DEIS schools (Gilleece and Nelis, 2023[16]). Yet, evidence from PISA 2022 suggests that, at least at the post-primary level, the impact of teacher shortages is significantly more

pronounced in disadvantaged schools, where 79.9% of principals reported that shortages hindered instruction, compared to 58.1% in advantaged schools (Figure 4.4). This difference was one of the largest observed among OECD countries and is consistent with reports heard by the OECD review team that DEIS schools faced particular challenges attracting and retaining staff and sometimes failed to fill positions by the beginning of the school year in part because they were perceived as difficult teaching environments.

Figure 4.4. Shortages of teaching staff by schools' socio-economic composition (2022)

Percentage of students whose school's capacity to provide instruction is hindered to some extent or a lot by a lack of teaching staff; based on principals' reports
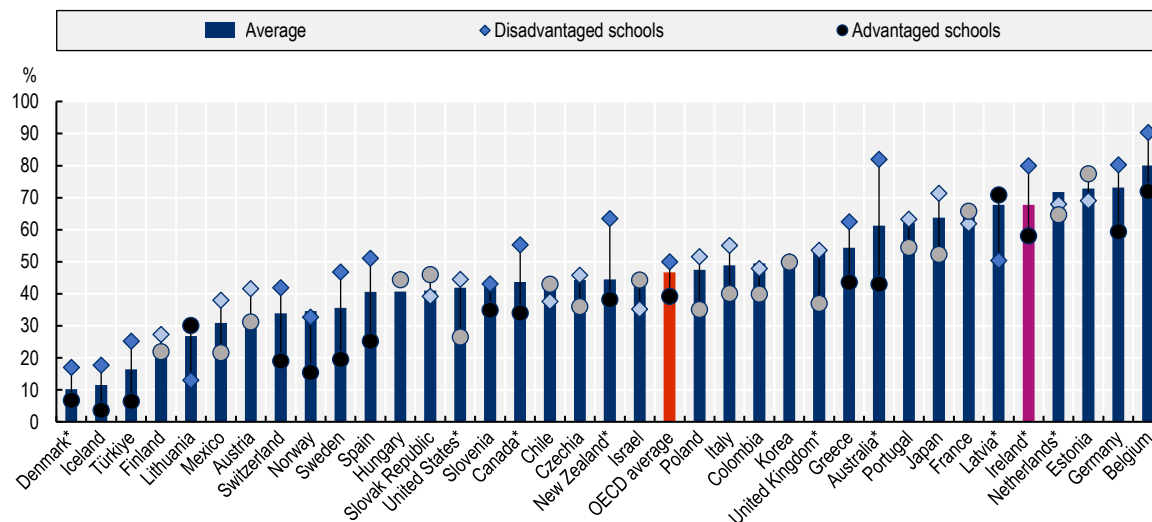
Note: * Caution is required when interpreting estimates because one or more PISA sampling standards were not met (see Reader's Guide, Annexes A2 and A4 in OECD (2023[14])). Schools' socio-economic profile is measured by the PISA index of economic, social and cultural status (ESCS). Statistically significant differences are shown in a darker tone.
Source: OECD (2023[12]), *PISA 2022 Results (Volume II): Learning During – and From – Disruption*, Table II.B1.5.1, https://doi.org/10.1787/a97db61c-en and authors' analysis.

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While many OECD countries have experienced teacher shortages in recent years, their patterns and causes vary across contexts, often involving a complex combination of factors related to demographic and labour market development as well as the profession's attractiveness (OECD, 2019[60]). Interviews with stakeholders in Ireland, for example, suggest that the high cost of living may have aggravated schools' recruitment difficulties, particularly in the capital region, which is home to some of the country's most disadvantaged schools. Indeed, in PISA 2022, the lack of teaching staff was particularly pronounced in Dublin, where 78.6% of principals reported that the lack of teachers hindered instruction, compared to 67.8% across the country. Yet, reports of shortages were similarly high in small towns of 3 000 to 15 000 inhabitants (71.1%) and towns of 15 000 to 100 000 inhabitants (74.6%) (OECD, 2023[61]).

In many OECD countries, teachers' well-being and problems related to teachers' long-term absenteeism – while long-standing challenges – have also come into sharp relief since the COVID-19 pandemic. Even though teachers in DEIS schools receive a wide range of support and do not face their professional challenges in isolation, disadvantaged schools in Ireland appear to be the hardest hit by teacher absenteeism. In PISA 2022, 31.2% of 15-year-old students in Ireland attended schools whose principal reported that students' learning was hindered by teacher absenteeism (broadly in line with the

OECD average of 26.5%). In disadvantaged schools, 42.0% of students were hindered in their learning by teacher absenteeism, compared to 19.8% in advantaged schools. This 22.2 percentage point gap was statistically significant, well above the OECD average of 7.4 percentage points and the sixth largest gap observed among OECD countries (OECD, 2023[61]).

It is critical to better understand and address the causes of teacher absenteeism in Ireland and to develop effective processes to replace absent teachers in the classroom, not least since teacher absences have been shown to negatively affect students' learning outcomes (Herrmann and Rockoff, 2012[73]). As discussed in Chapter 5, the OECD review team has observed examples of highly motivated school staff volunteering time to support disadvantaged students (e.g. to organise homework or breakfast clubs, particularly in schools that did not benefit from additional resources for these activities). Although commendable at the individual level, this reliance in the face of staff or capacity shortages raises concerns around sustainability at both the individual and system level and its impact on teachers' well-being needs to be taken seriously.

The staff shortages affecting Irish schools are not limited to teachers. Shortages of assisting staff (such as pedagogical support, administrative staff or management personnel) appear to aggravate the problem in some schools. In PISA 2022, 40.0% of 15-year-old students attended schools whose principal reported that instruction was hindered (to some extent or a lot) by a lack of assisting staff – a significant proportion, and slightly above the OECD average of 37.2% (OECD, 2023[12]). Moreover, 22.2% students attended schools where instruction was hindered by inadequate or poorly qualified assisting staff (a little above the OECD average of 19.3%) (ibid.).

Staff shortages within Ireland's schools are compounded by those of relevant external support services on which schools rely to support their most disadvantaged students in particular. This concerns, for example, NEPS and the Tusla Education Support Service (TESS, formerly the Education Welfare Service), whose lack of capacity significantly constrained their ability to follow up on students' long-term absences. The OECD review team gained the impression that the most effective DEIS schools were able to take on much of the work that might otherwise be provided by overstretched health services, but not all can be expected to compensate for these capacity challenges.

The Irish government has already put some measures in place to incentivise students to join the teaching profession, notably announcing EUR 4 million of funding to introduce an incentive scheme for newly qualified teachers. Primary and post-primary teachers joining the profession with professional master's degrees (PME) in education may be eligible for an incentive payment of EUR 2 000, following the completion of the 2024/25 school year (Houses of the Oireachtas, 2023[74]). Furthermore, the Teaching Council has introduced regulations allowing for the registration of third and fourth year undergraduate student teachers to cover substitutable vacancies (as of November 2023, 2 700 student teachers had registered under this route). In a further effort to ease short-term supply issues, retired teachers have been offered abatements for returning to teach for up to 50 days in 2021, 2022 and 2023 (Department of Education, 2024[11]).

Ensuring that the supply of teachers meets demand while maintaining and improving the quality of the teaching workforce is a complex policy challenge. Given the need to factor in longer-term demographic and other trends and the risk of creating oversupply issues in the future, addressing teacher shortages requires careful monitoring (Santiago, 2002[75]). In Ireland, the Teaching Council is responsible for advising the DoE on teacher supply issues and contributing to efforts to forecast supply and demand. Between 2014 and 2015, the Teaching Council led a technical working group, including representatives of the Higher Education Authority, to inform future planning and develop a teacher supply model (OECD, 2019[60]; The Teaching Council, 2015[76]). This work has since been continued under the aforementioned Teacher Supply Action Plan (Department of Education, 2020[71]). The model's forecasts (which predicted a consistent oversupply of new primary and post-primary teachers between 2022 and 2036) and their methodological

assumptions attracted considerable criticism from teacher unions and other stakeholders (Harford and Fleming, 2023[77]).

Professional learning support is critical to strengthen capacity in DEIS schools, but multiple factors limit teachers' engagement in continuing professional learning

Expectations for teachers' engagement in continuing professional learning are comparatively low and there is no regular staff appraisal to guide it

Strengthening teachers' capacity for high-quality instruction requires a strong emphasis on continuing professional learning from the time they enter the classroom to the end of their careers. This is particularly true in the context of DEIS schools, where students' needs are highly complex and require teachers to acquire skills and engage in pedagogical practices that were not necessarily covered in their initial teacher education. Although many teachers in Ireland are highly motivated to improve their practice through CPL, they are not required to engage in regular professional learning (Department of Education, 2024[11]).[7] Instead, teachers' individual professional learning largely depends on a high level of intrinsic motivation and their schools' capacity to support this practice, leading to variable levels of engagement.

The Teaching Council's *Cosán* framework for teachers' professional learning constitutes an important step in promoting the concept of teachers as life-long learners. Nevertheless, Ireland's lack of general requirements for primary and post-primary teachers to participate in CPL stands out in international comparison (OECD, 2022[78]). In 2021, among the 35 OECD countries and other participants with available information, Ireland was one of only six that did not require teachers to engage in PD or where requirements only applied to teachers in specific circumstances. In Ireland's case, once teachers have completed the mandatory CPL as part of their *Droichead* induction, they are only required to engage in further training should they wish to take on additional responsibilities, e.g. for the induction of newly qualified teachers, which requires three days of Professional Support Team training. Even if CPL requirements or entitlements cover a relatively small amount of time, they can foster a shared understanding that CPL is a regular part of teachers' professional practice and provide a basis for creating a policy environment that is supportive of teachers' professional learning needs (ibid.).

DEIS schools have priority access to certain intensive training courses (such as Reading Recovery or the Incredible Years programme) and there is no charge for teachers' voluntary participation in DoE funded CPL during the school year. Nevertheless, other barriers – including the organisation of substitution for teachers engaging in CPL – can limit their engagement in practice. Following the COVID-19 pandemic in September 2020, only 30% of primary principals and 10% of post-primary principals reported that they succeeded in finding substitute cover for all teacher absences (Department of Education, 2022[79]). Significant progress has been made at the primary level, with the establishment of local Teacher Supply Panels starting in 2019 (Department of Education, 2019[80]). During the 2023/24 school year, 166 such panels were in operation, providing nearly 2 900 schools with access to substitute teachers to cover short term absences of not more than four weeks. At the post-primary level, no equivalent system is in place.

More emphasis could also be placed on providing DEIS teachers with a perspective of continuous improvement and guidance to ensure that their professional learning contributes to wider school improvement objectives (OECD, 2019[60]). Staff development is considered during schools' self-evaluations, the DEIS action planning process, and in quality conversations between teachers and their senior management personnel. Nevertheless, Ireland is among a minority of OECD countries that do not engage in the systematic, regular appraisal of teachers or school leaders (OECD, 2015[27]).

In 2015, 25 of 35 OECD countries used the results of regular teacher appraisals to inform decisions about teachers' professional development activities (OECD, 2015[27]). The lack of formal legislative frameworks or centrally mandated practices related to individual teachers' regular appraisals in Ireland does not

preclude such processes taking place at the school level. In the school questionnaire for PISA 2022, for example, a large share of Irish principals reported appraising their teachers and that this practice had a moderate (36.7%) or a large (12.0%) impact on their opportunities for professional development activities (close to the OECD averages of 35.8% and 11.9%, respectively) (OECD, 2023[61]). Yet, without formalising these practices, it will be difficult to ensure that teachers in all schools have a chance to receive regular feedback on their practices. It also misses an opportunity to support school leaders in using regular staff appraisals to advance the goals of DEIS action planning and to support disadvantaged students.

The culture of informal school-based professional learning is unevenly developed

In addition to the lack of requirements for individual professional learning and regular teacher appraisals, Ireland's culture of informal school-based professional learning is still incipient in many schools. There appears to be a strong interest in peer-learning among teachers and collaboration is encouraged as part of the school self-evaluation process (Department of Education, 2022[81]) as well as the Inspectorate's "Looking at Our School Quality Frameworks for Primary and Post-Primary Schools" (Inspectorate, 2022[82]; Inspectorate, 2022[83]). Nevertheless, the OECD review team formed the impression that not all schools are systematically engaging in collaborative learning, particularly in the form of regular classroom observations and feedback (either by school leaders or by peers).

As discussed above, school leaders in Ireland clearly recognise the value of professional learning. However, relatively few principals or senior staff members in schools observe their teachers' lessons. Only 43.9% of students had principals who reported this practice in PISA 2022 – one of the lowest across the OECD and compared to 77.3% on average (OECD, 2023[12]). Although teachers in DEIS schools might benefit the most from continued support, teachers in disadvantaged schools were significantly less likely to benefit from lesson observations than those in advantaged schools (Figure 4.5).

Figure 4.5. Differences in lesson observation practices, by school characteristics (2022)

Proportion of students in advantaged and disadvantaged schools whose principal or senior staff observed lessons to monitor the practice of teachers; based on principals' reports

Note: * Caution is required when interpreting estimates because one or more PISA sampling standards were not met (see Reader's Guide, Annexes A2 and A4 in OECD (2023[14])). Schools' socio-economic profile is measured by the PISA index of economic, social and cultural status (ESCS). Statistically significant differences are shown in a darker tone.
Source: OECD (2023[12]), *PISA 2022 Results (Volume II): Learning During – and From – Disruption*, Tables II.B1.6.51 and II.B1.6.54, https://doi.org/10.1787/a97db61c-en.

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From PISA data, it also appears as though teachers in Ireland's most disadvantaged schools are the least likely to receive feedback on their practice from their school leadership. Overall, only 23% of principals (compared to 58% on average across OECD countries) reported providing feedback to teachers based on observations of instruction in the classroom at least once a month (OECD, 2023[12]). Not only were teachers in Ireland's disadvantaged schools among the most likely to never or almost never receive this type of feedback (34.1%, compared to 8.4% on average across OECD countries – behind Portugal and Greece only), but they were also significantly more likely to go without this feedback than their peers in advantaged schools (15.4%) (OECD, 2023[61]). Although the reasons for this pattern are unclear, it is almost unique among OECD countries and a cause for concern. In contrast to most OECD countries, it is more common for teachers in Ireland to have their lessons observed by someone external to the school, rather than by a colleague within the school, according to PISA 2022 data (OECD, 2023[61]).

Not only are lesson observation practices less common in Ireland than in other OECD countries, there is also evidence of significant inequities across schools. Irish teachers were significantly more likely to engage in peer-review practices in socio-economically advantaged schools (70.7%) than in disadvantaged schools (42.9%) (Figure 4.6). This discrepancy of 26 percentage points was the largest observed among OECD countries (OECD, 2023[12]). The same was true for lesson observations by principals or senior staff, who were 28 percentage points more likely to engage in these practices in advantaged schools (70.2%) than in disadvantaged schools (42.5%) – again, by far the biggest gap observed among OECD countries (Figure 4.5). Although no PISA 2022 data on lesson observations in DEIS schools have been published yet, the fact that this practice was least common among socio-economically average schools (31.4%) may suggest that DEIS schools are working more intensively with observations than they would otherwise (ibid.).

Figure 4.6. Differences in teacher peer-review practices, by school characteristics (2022)

Proportion of students in advantaged and disadvantaged schools whose teachers engaged in peer reviews; based on principals' reports

Note: * Caution is required when interpreting estimates because one or more PISA sampling standards were not met (see Reader's Guide, Annexes A2 and A4 in OECD (2023[14])). Schools' socio-economic profile is measured by the PISA index of economic, social and cultural status (ESCS). Statistically significant differences are shown in a darker tone.
Source: OECD (2023[12]), *PISA 2022 Results (Volume II): Learning During – and From – Disruption*, Tables II.B1.6.51 and II.B1.6.53, https://doi.org/10.1787/a97db61c-en.

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A high level of students' needs places a strain on DEIS schools' capacity in several priority areas

Key staff within and around DEIS schools would benefit from additional support in addressing their students' needs

Overall, principals in Ireland are confident in their teachers' ability to meet students' needs. However, 19.9% of 15-year-olds attended a school whose principal reported in PISA 2022 that teachers – to some extent – could not meet their students' needs (compared to 27.8% to some extent or a lot on average across OECD countries). Teachers are not expected to address all of their students' needs or to address them on their own. Irish teachers are supported by and work with a wide range of professionals, particularly in DEIS schools, including guidance counsellors, special education teachers (SET), special needs assistants (SNA), HSCL Coordinators, SCP staff and Student Support Teams. Yet, high levels of students' needs are placing a strain on the entire support system and the OECD review team formed the impression that DEIS schools were particularly affected by limited capacity and the support available to key staff.

HSCL Coordinators play a key role in supporting the parents or guardians of students most at risk of educational disadvantage in DEIS schools (see Chapter 5). Given that HSCL Coordinators are recruited exclusively among teachers, their responsibilities and task profile – consisting predominantly of home visits and meetings with parents (Weir et al., 2018[84]) – require significant preparation and adjustments from new appointees. New HSCL Coordinators receive an induction booklet, a half-day online orientation, and four days of in-person induction during their first year (two at the start and two in the middle of the school year), which is organised and delivered through TESS (TESS, 2021, p. 13[85]). Schools are also advised

to identify new HSCL Coordinators early to allow for a transition period during which they can shadow the acting Coordinator in their school.

During their first year, HSCL Coordinators also receive training in Motivational Interviewing (MI) and on the SCP Intake Framework, which is delivered to staff of all three stands of TESS and designed to facilitate joined-up thinking and working across the SCP, the Educational Welfare Service (EWS), and the HSCL Scheme to best serve the most marginalised children and families in Ireland. From years 2-4 of their tenure, HSCL Coordinators receive two further days of training and have the option to submit written requests for additional training, if approved by their principals and boards of management. HSCL Coordinators are also required to participate in regular local cluster meetings, which are organised every six to eight weeks. Clusters are also encouraged to set up a buddy system matching new Coordinators with more experienced peers and each HSCL Coordinator is assigned one of TESS Integrated Services Managers (ISMs) to whom they can address their questions and concerns in regular meetings.

Since the Scheme's introduction in 1990, the training of HSCL Coordinators has undergone a series of transformations as the number of Coordinators expanded significantly over the decades. Notably, over the years, there has been a shift in emphasis from in-person induction training towards a model of continued and cluster-based support. In a 2017 survey, HSCL Coordinators expressed their general satisfaction with the Scheme, including its pre-service training, and praised the support of the PDST. Nevertheless, half of the Coordinators indicated their dissatisfaction with the continuing professional learning available to them (Weir et al., 2018[84]). Since then, the training for HSCL Coordinators has evolved, expanding the amount of professional development beyond their first year. Ensuring the quality of HSCL Coordinators' work is one of the Inspectorate's current priorities and the OECD review team has been informed of plans to evaluate the quality of HSCL provision in a sample of schools over the course of 2024, and to publish a report on the findings.

The OECD review team formed the impression that at least some of the capacity challenges experienced by DEIS schools can be explained by a rise in the level and complexity of students' needs, as well as the support schools are expected to provide. In many respects, schools are seen as a hub for different actors to interact and to provide children with wrap-around support services in a safe environment, or at least to direct them to appropriate sources of external support.

Many of the actors interviewed during the OECD review visit have embraced this vision of schools in the spirit of a holistic approach to learning. Nevertheless, it was also apparent that schools – particularly those with the highest levels of disadvantage – cannot rise to this challenge alone and without sufficient capacity around them. Stakeholders pointed to the lack of therapeutic support and other staff trained to work directly with students and parents on trauma and other severe issues impeding children's education (including psychologists, speech and language therapists, counsellors, occupational therapists, etc.).

NEPS has seen the need for a whole-school approach to using trauma-informed practices and launched an e-Learning course on the subject in 2023 that has been met with high demand (NEPS, 2023[86]). In addition, NEPS rolled out a Pilot Programme of Counselling and Wellbeing/Mental Health Support (see Chapter 5). Nevertheless, NEPS has acknowledged a shortage of educational psychologists in Ireland, compared with benchmarking countries, and there are limits to the gaps that can be filled by teachers' continuing professional learning.

A lack of administrative capacity weakens pedagogical leadership in some schools

Teachers and school principals in many OECD countries report spending a significant amount of their working time on administrative tasks (Boeskens and Nusche, 2021[87]). An excessive administrative burden can prevent principals from providing effective pedagogical leadership for their schools and distract teachers from their core pedagogical work related to teaching and learning. Ensuring that schools have sufficient administrative capacity can, therefore, play an important role for in ability to provide high-quality

education and to meet all learners' needs. As discussed in Chapter 6, administrative and technical capacity also play an important role in enabling DEIS schools to engage in data-informed improvement planning and the collection and analysis of data.

Among OECD countries, there is a significant variation in the level of administrative support available in schools. In international comparison, post-primary schools in Ireland employ relatively few administrative personnel besides the school management (such as receptionists, secretaries and administration assistants). In PISA 2022, principals reported that there were approximately 290 students per member of administrative staff on average – similar to Estonia, Germany and Ireland, above the OECD average of around 200, and significantly above countries like Japan, Korea and the United Kingdom, which had fewer than 120 students per administrative staff member (OECD, 2023[61]). Yet, the number of support staff is not the only or even the most important factor that plays a role in reducing administrative workload. In England (United Kingdom) and Korea, for example – among the countries that employ the most administrative support staff – teachers still devote the largest share of their working time to administrative tasks (OECD, 2019[60]).

Ireland acknowledges the distinct challenges faced by teachers and school leaders in DEIS schools and provides them with additional administrative support to meet them. As discussed above, DEIS Urban Band 1 schools with an enrolment of more than 500 students benefit from an administrative deputy principal exempt from teaching duties (the threshold is set at 573 for non-DEIS and DEIS Urban Band 2 schools). In addition, DEIS schools are allocated a full-time administrative principal position at lower levels of enrolment than non-DEIS schools (Department of Education, 2023[24]). In interviews with the OECD review team, schools reported that this additional support made a significant difference to their work, with some using it to support teaching and learning directly while others used the added capacity within the leadership team to engage in fundraising for pedagogical projects. Nevertheless, some schools – particularly small schools and those with exceptionally high levels of disadvantage – reported struggling with a high administrative burden and limited capacity. Most small schools, for example, do not have a full-time secretary and principals are exempt from teaching duties only in DEIS schools with upwards of 136 (DEIS Urban Band 2) or 113 (DEIS Urban Band 1) students.

The diversity of school staff remains limited and key groups are underrepresented

The diversity of school staff and student-teacher congruence with respect to key demographic characteristics (e.g. belonging to the same ethnic or socio-economic group) can help to improve the well-being and education outcomes of minority and disadvantaged students (Brussino, 2021[52]). Evidence, mostly from the United States, suggests that teachers from similar backgrounds can improve the academic outcomes of ethnic minority and low-income students (Egalite, Kisida and Winters, 2015[88]; Dee, 2004[89]; Goldhaber, Theobald and Tien, 2015[90]). A diverse teacher population can also provide disadvantaged students with role models, contribute to their sense of belonging at school and has been shown to reduce drop-out rates and raise academic aspirations (Egalite and Kisida, 2017[91]; Gershenson et al., 2022[92]). In interviews with the OECD review team, for example, stakeholders reported that Traveller and Roma students, while generally underrepresented in preschool education, responded positively to early childhood education and care offers with a significant representation of individuals from the Traveller and Roma community among its staff.

The diversity of the teaching workforce has been a policy focus in Ireland for over a decade (Keane, Heinz and Mc Daid, 2022[93]), particularly since national datasets have brought to light the relatively homogenous socio-demographic profile of applicants and entrants into ITE programmes (Keane and Heinz, 2015[94]). Since at least 2013, data have suggested that students from non-Irish backgrounds and those who attended DEIS schools were under-represented among entrants into primary and post-primary ITE programmes (Darmody and Smyth, 2016[18]). Improving access to ITE by students from underrepresented target groups has been identified as a policy goal since the "*National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher*

Education 2015-2019". In 2015, these target groups included a range of underrepresented socio-economic groups, first-time mature students, students with disabilities, part-time/flexible learners, further education award holders, and Traveller students (Higher Education Authority, 2015[95]).

The current "National Access Plan for 2022-28" once again includes the goal to increase teacher diversity by supporting equity of access, participation and success in ITE for three priority groups: students who are socio-economically disadvantaged, members of Traveller and Roma communities, and students with disabilities, including intellectual disabilities. Targets have been set to increase the number of Traveller students among new entrants to higher education from 33 to 150 (Higher Education Authority, 2022[96]). In addition, the "Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy 2017-21", called on the DoE to support the higher education sector in taking measures to encourage and support individuals from the Traveller and Roma communities to become teachers (Department of Justice and Equality, 2017[59]).

Nevertheless, Traveller students remain severely underrepresented in higher education and there is little data on the representation of Roma students. The 2015 Higher Education Access Plan set the target to increase the number of Traveller students among new entrants to higher education (which constituted around 0.1% at the time) from 35 to 80. By 2020, the target was largely missed, with the overall number remaining at 33, following a modest increase in 2017 and 2019 (Higher Education Authority, 2022[96]). Data on Roma students among entrants to higher education have only been collected by HEA since 2020/21, in line with the census's first-time inclusion of "Roma" as an option in its ethnicity question in 2022.

A number of diversity projects addressing both primary and post-primary ITE have been underway since 2017, funded with EUR 5.4 million for a six-year period by the HEA "Programme for Access to Higher Education" (PATH) (Keane, Heinz and Mc Daid, 2022[93]; Department of Education, 2023[55]). This included extra support for students from target groups to transition from school into ITE as well as the establishment of direct entry routes for students with further education qualifications to diversify the intake of ITE programmes (Department of Education, 2023[55]). Funding from PATH also benefited the Marino Institute of Education's Migrant Teacher Project, which supports qualified, internationally-educated immigrant teachers to enter the Irish primary and post-primary education systems (MIE, 2024[97]).

Nevertheless, teachers in Ireland still fail to reflect the diversity of their students. This likely has a variety of causes, including the low number of diverse teachers entering ITE and those completing the programmes. The conditions for entering the teaching profession, such as the Irish language requirement in primary education, may add barriers that risk putting off candidates from disadvantaged backgrounds. Higher attrition rates among diverse in-service teachers can be another factor reducing the representativeness of teaching staff. International evidence, primarily from the United States, for example, shows that teachers from minority backgrounds (and novice teachers) are disproportionately employed in disadvantaged, more challenging school settings, which can lead to higher attrition rates (Brussino, 2021[52]). In light of the range and complexity of factors that can contribute to the lack of diversity among teachers, efforts to further strengthen the monitoring of the ITE population, as outlined in the "National Access Plan for 2022-28", are an important step to improve the problem's diagnosis and to ascertain which policy interventions hold promise.

Policy recommendations

Address staff shortages through targeted efforts to attract and retain diverse professionals for a career in disadvantaged schools

Ireland is facing a significant shortage of teachers and other key staff, which is compromising schools' capacity to provide all learners with the support they need, particularly the most vulnerable students in DEIS schools, who may require more intensive and coordinated support from a range of professionals. Alleviating staff shortages is a complex challenge and any successful attempt to address it will need to be

based on a thorough analysis of its underlying causes. Ireland should, therefore, further strengthen its efforts to monitor the supply and demand of teachers and the factors that drive them, particularly in disadvantaged schools. To ensure that the teaching profession reflects the diversity of Ireland's students, efforts to alleviate staff shortages should also pay attention to attracting and retaining candidates from underrepresented groups. Greater flexibility in the recruitment of non-teaching staff could ease shortages among key support roles.

Strengthen the monitoring of the teacher supply and demand to identify and address the causes of staff shortages in disadvantaged schools

Teacher shortages in Ireland, as perceived by post-primary school principals in PISA, have intensified over recent years and reached one of the highest levels among OECD countries in 2022. These shortages are particularly pronounced in disadvantaged schools and need to be addressed to ensure equal learning opportunities for all students. A significant proportion of principals reported that the lack of staff compromises their quality of instruction and students at risk of educational disadvantage were likely to suffer the most, as schools resort to unqualified and out-of-subject teachers or cancel classes. The factors affecting the supply of teachers are complex and measures to increase it can have significant fiscal consequences and implications for the long-term balance of teacher supply and demand. As described above, Ireland currently lacks sufficient evidence and an effective system to monitor teacher supply and demand. An effective strategy for workforce planning in Ireland must, therefore, be based on a more thorough understanding of both the extent of teacher shortages and their underlying causes.

As part of its Teacher Supply Action Plan, the DoE has undertaken important efforts to project teacher supply and demand at the primary and post-primary levels, based on the limited data available at the central level (primarily demographic projections and teacher payroll data) (Department of Education, 2020[71]). These efforts have revealed significant data gaps preventing central authorities from generating disaggregated insights (e.g. concerning the number of retirements, resignations and new registrations at the regional level) and demonstrated the importance of purpose-led data collections and a more continuous monitoring of teacher supply and demand. The public controversy surrounding the methodology of previous efforts to predict teacher demand and supply highlights the importance of engaging stakeholders in this process to produce transparent forecasts that can be widely accepted (Harford and Fleming, 2023[77]).

A range of factors can impact the teacher supply to varying degrees (e.g. the cost of living in large urban areas, teachers going abroad, a lack of job stability or competitive salaries, career changes, long-term absences, concentrations in certain subject areas, policy changes e.g. related to inclusion etc.). Further research is needed to reach a consensus on the extent to which these factors contribute to teacher shortages in Ireland and which factors matter the most in the case of disadvantaged schools. If stark differences in the cost of living across regions and cities persist and emerge as a central barrier to teacher recruitment in DEIS Urban schools, for example, Ireland may need to explore the feasibility of incentives or allowances to ensure that teachers can afford a decent standard of living regardless of their school's location (such as the London weighting in England [United Kingdom]).

To guide central efforts to address teacher shortages in DEIS schools in the short-, medium- and long-term, and to identify their potential disproportionate effect on disadvantaged students, the monitoring of teacher supply and demand must be strengthened. The decentralised system of teacher recruitment has complicated attempts to get a better understanding e.g. of the number of unfilled vacancies and their concentrations in specific subject areas or geographical areas. Nevertheless, international examples from decentralised systems show ways in which local data on teacher supply and demand can be collected, harmonised and made available to facilitate monitoring at the national level to inform effective workforce planning (Box 4.2). On-going efforts by the DoE to develop a strategic workforce plan and to improve the monitoring of vacancies should be continued and designed to identify potential inequities in DEIS schools'

ability to attract and retain high-quality teachers. If confirmed, further action will need to be taken to ensure that DEIS schools are as well positioned to attract teachers as non-DEIS schools.

Box 4.2. Monitoring teacher supply and demand in Australia and Ontario (Canada)

Harmonising data on teacher supply at the national level in Australia

Starting in 2017, the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership was tasked with implementing the Australian Teacher Workforce Data strategy, which sought to unite and connect existing data on initial teacher education and the teacher workforce across all systems and sectors. In doing so, it provided nationally consistent, longitudinal data on the teaching profession, the teacher supply pipeline and teachers' career trajectories (AITSL, 2018[98]). Based on the strategy, the Institute now publishes annual reports on the teacher workforce (AITSL, 2023[99]) and on the ITE pipeline, including information on commencements, enrolments, completions and attrition rates (AITSL, 2024[100]).

Monitoring of demand and supply by a self-regulating professional body in Ontario (Canada)

In Ontario (Canada), the College of Teachers is the province's self-regulatory body of the teaching profession and supports forecasting and steering with information on the demographic characteristics of the current workforce. The college surveys its members on an annual basis and the resulting report, "Transitions to Teaching", provides information on teachers' initial and additional qualifications earned throughout their career. Based on these data, the province can anticipate teacher qualification needs and gear admissions accordingly (Ontario College of Teachers, 2023[101]). Higher education authorities may also be involved in monitoring and forecasting. In Ontario, the province's Higher Education Quality Council provides research and policy advice, including on labour market trends and outlooks for teaching (HEQCO, 2024[102]).

Source: OECD (2019[60]), *Working and Learning Together: Rethinking Human Resource Policies for Schools*, https://doi.org/10.1787/b7aaf050-en.

Once an effective system for monitoring the supply and demand of teachers is in place, there should also be a reflection on establishing closer links between the forecast demand and the provision of places in ITE programmes (Department of Education, 2020[71]). The Minister determines the number of study places on state-funded primary ITE programmes in Ireland, but does not currently set quotas for post-primary programmes or those offered by private providers (OECD, 2020[23]). Although many OECD countries impose enrolment caps, at least in some fields of higher education (in some cases based on measures of labour market needs) (OECD, 2021[103]), Ireland does not systematically link resourcing decisions concerning the supply of publicly funded ITE places in higher education institutions to future demand (OECD, 2022[104]).

Continue efforts to attract and retain diverse candidates for the teaching profession

Strategies to resolve the teacher shortage in the short-term and medium-term should go hand in hand with on-going efforts to ensure that teaching remains an attractive, intellectually stimulating long-term career with the potential to attract bright and diverse candidates to work in schools. Although the diversity of Ireland's teaching workforce has been on the policy agenda for a long time and important initiatives have been launched to attract candidates from target populations to ITE, they have so far largely fallen short of their goals. It thus remains imperative for the DoE to continue working with HEIs to improve diversity in the teacher pipeline. At the same time, the development of policy strategies should take a more holistic approach based on a thorough analysis of the factors limiting diverse candidates' entry into the profession,

as well as their retention (OECD, 2023[105]). Diverse teachers can face barriers at each stage of their careers (Heinz and Keane, 2018[106]):

- Prior to entry into ITE (i.e. factors influencing perceptions of teaching as an attractive and viable career choice);
- At the point of entry into ITE (i.e. having the necessary qualifications and successfully applying to enter ITE);
- During their progression through ITE (i.e. succeeding in ITE and overcoming potential impediments to their performance or graduation);
- At the point of entry into schools (i.e. entering the teaching workforce and obtaining a position in schools); and
- During the first years in school and beyond (i.e. completing the induction process, succeeding as NQTs and progressing beyond).

A range of promising measures to increase diversity in the teaching pipeline have been proposed and initiated over the years, including those included in the "National Access Plan 2022-2028" (Higher Education Authority, 2022[96]) and, going back as far as 2005, proposals by the Moving Beyond Educational Disadvantage Committee (Educational Disadvantage Committee, 2005[107]). Further analyses of the barriers to diversity in the teaching profession should inform an evaluation of on-going initiatives and, if needed, the addition of further measures. These could include support networks for prospective teacher candidates, considering the relaxation of certain entry requirements that may discourage diversity among applicants (e.g. Irish language requirements in primary education), or organising access programmes for learners from disadvantaged settings (OECD, 2023[105]). Several OECD countries have also successfully conducted outreach activities to attract diverse candidates that are underrepresented in the teaching workforce to ITE programmes (Box 4.3).

Box 4.3. Outreach activities to attract diverse candidates into ITE programmes in Germany

Workshops for students with an immigrant background interested in a teaching career in Germany

Between 2008 and 2014, the German *Schülercampus – mehr Migranten werden Lehrer* (Campus for Pupils – More Migrants Are Becoming Teachers) project provided targeted career counselling to upper secondary students with an immigrant background who were interested in pursuing a teaching career. The project was implemented by the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees in partnership with the ZEIT Foundation and local universities. The first *Schülercampus* took place in Hamburg and was expanded to ten federal states across Germany in the following years. The project offers four-day intensive residential workshops for students from the age of 16 that allow them to explore the opportunities of becoming a teacher. The workshops involve: individual and group activities, seminars, Q&A sessions; practical work experience in a school to enable participants to explore different aspects of the profession such as access qualifications, studying, salary and progression and personal qualities required for teaching; and, opportunities to engage with teaching students who have a migration background (Brussino, 2021[52]; Donlevy, Meierkord and Rajania, 2016[108]). Since 2014/15, universities across Germany are organising orientation days as part of the follow-up project *Vielfalt im Klassenzimmer = Vielfalt im Lehrerzimmer* (Diversity in the Classroom = Diversity in the Staffroom).

Source: Adapted from OECD (2023[105]), *Equity and Inclusion in Education: Finding Strength through Diversity*, https://doi.org/10.1787/e9072e21-en; Donlevy, Meierkord and Rajania (2016[108]), *Study on the diversity within the teaching profession with particular focus on migrant and/or minority background*, https://doi.org/10.2766/873440.

In addition, the DoE should consider measures to improve retention, particularly among diverse teachers and those teaching in difficult environments. While research into the retention of diverse teachers remains limited, mentoring programmes designed specifically to meet the needs of teachers from ethnic minority or Indigenous backgrounds have shown some promise in improving their retention (OECD, 2023[105]). Box 4.4 presents two international examples of such programmes.

Box 4.4. Mentoring programmes to improve the retention of diverse teachers

The *Te Whatu Kura* mentoring initiative in New Zealand

In New Zealand, the *Te Whatu Kura* mentoring initiative was introduced by the Ministry of Education in 2014 to support beginning teachers in indigenous Māori-medium settings to improve their retention. Prior to the programme's introduction, approximately 70% of beginning teachers in these schools had been estimated to leave the workforce during the first three years of their careers, compared to 30% in English-medium settings. The *Te Whatu Kura* programme focused on training teacher mentors (who in turn support beginning teachers) in developing school induction programmes, through regional cluster meetings and workshops, a range of online supports, and in-school visits (Newbold, Trinick and Robertson, 2016[109]). An evaluation of the induction and mentoring programme found indicative evidence of its effectiveness with three-year attrition among participating teachers reduced to 20% (compared to the expected 70%) (Wehipeihana, Paipa and Smith, 2018[110]).

Peer support networks for beginning teachers in Boston (United States)

Evaluations of mentoring and support programmes for Indigenous and ethnic minority teachers in the United States have also yielded positive results (OECD, 2023[105]). In Boston (United States), for example, a small peer support network created for non-white male teachers was deemed successful in providing beginning teachers with social and emotional support as well as opportunities to discuss and share effective teaching strategies. The model was subsequently adopted across the Boston Public Schools district as part of a larger effort to improve retention among non-white male teachers (Gist et al., 2021[111]).

Source: OECD (2023[105]), *Equity and Inclusion in Education: Finding Strength through Diversity*, https://doi.org/10.1787/e9072e21-en.

The OECD review team formed the impression that DEIS schools (especially in urban areas) face particular challenges in recruiting and retaining teachers, at least in part due to their reputation as very demanding places to work. In interviews, some stakeholders suggested that this perception may be reinforced by the fact that many teacher candidates were unaware of the additional supports available to them in DEIS schools (i.e. additional administrative support, smaller class sizes and HSCL Coordinators). It may, therefore, be worth communicating these factors more clearly at the point of application and encouraging teachers to consider taking up the challenge of working in disadvantaged schools.

Allow for greater flexibility in the staffing and allocation of key support roles

The shortage of teachers in schools should not be considered in isolation, but more broadly within the context of staffing and allocating different roles in and around schools. Policy changes related to the opening of special classes and their staffing, for example, have a significant impact on the allocation and demand for teachers. Likewise, the significant expansion of the HSCL Scheme has been exclusively staffed by teachers previously serving in the classroom. The role of HSCL Coordinators is a highly attractive opportunity for teachers to acquire new skills and deepen their perspective on the needs of disadvantaged students, which they can bring back to the classroom or apply in leadership positions after the end of their five-year term. Nevertheless, requiring aspiring HSCL Coordinators to be practicing

teachers excludes a wide range of highly qualified candidates from the role as well as putting a limit on the scheme's scalability in the context of teacher shortages.

The DoE and Tusla should, therefore, consider diversifying their approach to staffing HSCL roles and widening the criteria for these roles (e.g. considering experienced youth workers and other professionals who work to support families), rather than relying fully on teacher-led provision. Even though staff shortages also affect other sectors from which HSCL Coordinators could be recruited, greater staffing flexibility could expand the pool of potential candidates. While care should be taken not to dilute the existing HSCL provisions, this could provide a basis for expanding the programme to a wider range of vulnerable and disadvantaged students in non-DEIS or DEIS Rural schools.

In 2022 and 2023, the DoE made a first important step in this direction when it used dormant account funds to assign ten HSCL Coordinators to work with 14 non-DEIS post-primary schools, together with the allocation of four HSCL Coordinators to work with schools in the Supporting Traveller and Roma students pilot (Eurydice, 2023[112]). Pending the positive evaluation of both initiatives, this could constitute an important step to increase support for the most disadvantaged students that are not enrolled in DEIS schools. As discussed in Chapters 3 and 5, the allocation of additional HSCL Coordinators (potentially part-time or shared across multiple schools) should be aligned with reflections on a reform of DEIS Bands and greater differentiation in DEIS supports for schools with different levels of disadvantage.

A more diverse approach to recruitment should also be considered for guidance counsellors, as was recommended in a recent OECD Skills Strategy review (OECD, 2023[113]). Counsellors in Ireland are well-trained with a postgraduate guidance counselling qualification at Level 8/9, but are mostly recruited from the teaching workforce. Considering a wider range of professionals for these roles, for example from the fields of youth work or family support work, could broaden the pool of candidates and help to alleviate staff shortages.

Embed teachers' continuing professional learning within a professional improvement cycle and remove barriers to participation

The learning needs of students in Ireland's mainstream schools have evolved significantly over recent decades. Addressing these needs requires teachers to continue their professional development, to update and to improve their practice over the course of their careers. Teachers in DEIS schools can avail themselves of a range of professional learning opportunities that are specifically aimed at addressing the needs of students at risk of educational disadvantage. To harness the full potential and maximise the impact of these opportunities, continuing professional learning in Ireland must be more firmly embedded in the professional improvement cycle – not just at the school level but also at the individual level. To address this, Ireland should establish a system of regular teacher appraisal, coupled with expanded opportunities for informal feedback by peers. This approach will not only foster a culture of continuous improvement and reflective practice, but also guide teachers on their professional learning journeys. Recognising teachers' individual involvement in CPL should not only be encouraged but also explicitly recognised by setting clear expectations and linking it to their regular appraisal process. Enhancing teachers' engagement in CPL also requires identifying and addressing existing barriers to participation. This involves creating supportive structures – including effective approaches to substitution – that allow teachers to participate in CPL without compromising their classroom responsibilities. By combining these approaches, Ireland could significantly enhance the quality and effectiveness of teaching in DEIS schools and beyond.

Establish a system of regular teacher appraisal and expand opportunities for informal feedback

Providing teachers with regular formative feedback on their work can be a powerful means to encourage their continuing professional learning (Taylor and Tyler, 2012[114]). OECD evidence suggests that appraisal processes can strengthen teachers' professionalism and performance, provided that it emphasises developmental evaluation and facilitates teachers' career progression (OECD, 2020[23]). The learning needs of disadvantaged students and how teachers in DEIS schools are expected to address them have evolved significantly, given the increasing diversity of learners, a greater emphasis on inclusion and the emergence of new, effective teaching practices (see Chapter 5). Considering these demands, providing teachers with regular feedback on their work is critical to adapting and improving their practices for greater equity and inclusion (OECD, 2023[105]). The absence of systematic staff appraisal and the limited use of classroom observations in Ireland thus severely limit opportunities for both teachers and principals, particularly in DEIS schools, to improve their practice and support the learning of the most disadvantaged students.

Introducing a system of formative appraisal could make an important contribution to capacity building in schools, and improve learner outcomes and motivation among school staff. To accomplish this, the results of the appraisal process should be explicitly linked to opportunities for professional development, for example, by informing teachers' professional learning plans. While all teachers and school leaders would benefit from such developmental plans, those who are found to struggle to improve might require more frequent feedback or more rigorous oversight (OECD, 2019[60]).

In order for appraisal processes to have a meaningful impact on teaching practices and be more than a bureaucratic exercise, they need to be carefully designed to avoid tensions between their multiple, formative and summative, purposes and overcome potential resource, capacity, technical, political and cultural barriers (OECD, 2019[60]). Given the intense demands on school leaders' time, a critical challenge will be to increase or redistribute resources and to shift the responsibilities of evaluation and management in order to permit those responsible for staff evaluations to engage in them effectively.

Teachers improve most when working in supportive environments alongside peers seeking to improve on similar dimensions (Johnson, Kraft and Papay, 2012[115]). To promote collective professional learning in schools, the results of individual teacher appraisals could be aggregated or fed into school self-evaluations to generate collective plans for professional development. Used in this way, evaluation-informed professional development can explicitly recognise the ecological context in which teachers and leaders' learning takes place (OECD, 2019[60]). Effective teacher appraisal also invariably involves some observation of the teachers' work, usually through direct lesson observation or portfolio review and feedback from other stakeholders in the school community (OECD, 2015[27]). The introduction of regular teacher appraisal should therefore be accompanied by efforts to strengthen the culture of peer-observation more widely, as a powerful way to foster informal collaborative learning in schools.

Although relatively few leadership teams in Ireland engage in lesson observations at the post-primary level, there are some informal professional learning practices in schools that can be further built on. For example, representatives of *Oide* confirmed that – while not yet widespread – some schools at the post-primary level were already experimenting with peer observation. *Oide* is well-positioned to take a lead in further expanding this culture of peer observation. For example, *Oide*'s professional learning leaders could proactively use their model lessons approach to showcase the value of lesson observation and promote the practice among teachers and school leaders.

Furthermore, 54.2% of principals in PISA 2022 reported that teachers had engaged in some form of peer-review practices during the previous year (see Figure 4.6 above), which was only slightly below the OECD average of 59.1% (OECD, 2023[12]). These peer-review practices include teachers' collaborative work on lesson plans and assessment instruments or lesson observations. All of these can be effective

forms of informal professional learning and students' performance in mathematics tended to be significantly higher in Irish schools where they took place, even after accounting for students' socio-economic status (ibid.).[8] Provided that teachers are given the opportunity, these practices should be built on to strengthen teachers' engagement in forms of professional learning that are embedded in their everyday practice.

Recognise and raise expectations for teachers' regular engagement in continuing professional learning

In order to further promote teachers' engagement in CPL activities and to recognise those that already do, Ireland should raise expectations for teachers' engagement in continuing professional learning. While both the "Code of Professional Conduct for Teachers" and the "*Cosán* Framework for Teachers' Learning" (The Teaching Council, 2016[31]; The Teaching Council, 2016[30]) emphasise the importance of career-long professional development, there are few structural provisions and supports to encourage teachers' participation in continuing learning beyond the school-wide professional development days. Encouraging collaborative forms of professional learning – focused on the needs of diverse learners – stands to benefit not only the quality of instruction, but can also help to avert feelings of professional isolation among diverse teachers and those working in Ireland's most disadvantaged schools (Bristol and Shirrell, 2019[116]).

Making professional development an explicit element of teachers' appraisal process and linking their regular evaluation to individual and school-wide professional learning plans could help foster a school culture of continuing professional learning. Likewise, school leaders should be provided with guidance and support to ensure that teachers can integrate a sufficient amount of CPL into their regular work, for example, by specifying how many of teachers' "Croke Park" hours can be expected to be spent on professional learning.

Address barriers to teachers' engagement in CPL, including access to substitution

Raising expectations for teachers' engagement in continuing professional learning should go hand in hand with efforts to address existing barriers that limit their participation. Stakeholder interviews conducted by the OECD review team as well as national surveys of teachers and principals indicate that easing schools' access to substitution will be an important factor in enabling greater engagement in professional learning (be it with colleagues, in Communities of Practice, or with external providers). PISA data suggest that DEIS schools are particularly afflicted by teacher shortages, which makes an effective substitution process especially important for them.

ITE providers have already introduced greater flexibility for student teachers to provide substitute cover. In addition, in 2019/20, the DoE piloted a Substitute Teacher Supply Panel Scheme for primary schools and expanded it nationwide in 2020/21. Although difficulties persist, this initiative constitutes an important step in the right direction and should be further developed, based on feedback from the profession. Since the difficulty of obtaining substitute teachers is even more pronounced in post-primary schools (Department of Education, 2022[79]), the DoE should also explore the feasibility of setting up similar systems at the post-primary level.

Other OECD countries where engagement in professional learning is not structurally embedded in teachers' working arrangements have faced similar challenges as Ireland, given the need to replace teachers engaging in CPL to enable their participation. The Flemish Community of Belgium has sought to address this challenge and ease the recruitment of substitute teachers by creating a pool of candidates for substitution (Box 4.5).

Box 4.5. Creation of substitute teacher pools in the Flemish Community of Belgium

Starting in 2018/19, the Flemish Community of Belgium's Ministry of Education created *lerarenplatform* (teacher platforms) to create a stable supply of substitute teachers for primary education. The platforms' goal was to support school boards in replacing absent teachers and to enable teachers' participation in continuing professional learning activities during school hours, which had become increasingly challenging in the context of teacher shortages (OECD, 2021[117]). The platforms also sought to provide greater job stability for beginning teachers and facilitate experienced teachers' replacement while they take on different assignments such as co-teaching, supervision or support (De Witte, De Cort and Gambi, 2023[118]).

Teachers are hired for the platforms on one-year contracts and receive a salary from the Ministry of Education for this period, which funded an initial 350 FTE teachers with a budget of EUR 7.5 million. In the 2023/24 school year, 1 621 primary school teachers served on the platforms (Flemish Department for Education and Training, 2024[119]). All substitute teachers are assigned to an anchor school, in their preferred geographic area, where they work when not substituting for teachers in other schools. For example, a part-time teacher may have a 30% position in a school belonging to the platform and dedicate another 20% of their time to substitute work through the platform.

In cases where no substitutions are needed, staff on the teacher platforms perform other pedagogical tasks such as co-teaching or supporting their peers. FTE teachers who are hired through the teacher platforms are expected to be deployed for 80% of their time. If less time was spent on substitution in a year, fewer FTE teachers would be funded in the next year. If more time was spent on substitution, resources for the following year would increase. The platforms' implementation has been monitored in co-operation with the labour unions and social partners. A similar pilot, at a smaller scale, had been set up at the secondary education level but it was not extended beyond 2020 (Eurydice, 2023[120]).

Source: Adapted from OECD (2019[60]), *Working and Learning Together: Rethinking Human Resource Policies for Schools*, https://doi.org/10.1787/b7aaf050-en; and Flemish Department for Education and Training (2018) *Circular Bao/2018/01: Lerarenplatform in het basisonderwijs [Circular Bao/2018/01: Teaching Platform in Primary Education]*, https://data-onderwijs.vlaanderen.be/edulex/document.aspx?docid=15150#7 (accessed on 28 February 2024).

Ireland's increased emphasis on Communities of Practice is laudable and particularly important for DEIS schools with diverse student and teacher populations, since it can help to decrease the isolation of diverse teaching staff and improve their retention along with having a positive impact on teaching practices (Bristol and Shirrell, 2019[116]). Nevertheless, encouraging teachers' sustained engagement in professional learning communities requires not only access to substitutes, but also sufficient resources and time in teachers' schedules. The School Excellence Fund DEIS initiative, for example, which ran from 2017 to 2021, provided clusters of schools with funding to implement context-specific, innovative programmes aimed at improving learning outcomes. Their outcomes have been evaluated by the Inspectorate (Education and Training Inspectorate, 2019[121]). The DoE should continue exploring such models, including to support DEIS teachers' engagement in more continuing professional learning. School systems like New Zealand have effectively deployed resources to give teachers time to engage in collaborative forms of professional learning (Box 4.6).

> **Box 4.6. Providing resources for teachers' collaborative professional learning**
>
> **Resourcing Communities of Learning (*Kāhui Ako*) in New Zealand**
>
> In New Zealand, education and training providers (schools, *kura* [schools that reflect Māori language, knowledge and culture in philosophy and practice], early learning services and further education providers) can seek permission from the education ministry to form a Community of Learning (*Kāhui Ako*). If approved, the community receives resources to allow time for teachers to work together on meeting the achievement challenges, drawing on each other's skills, knowledge and experience. Communities of learning can also adjust the roles of staff and establish additional leadership and teacher roles (across the community and within school). As of January 2021, there were 220 Communities of Learning in operation throughout New Zealand, comprised of 1 868 schools, 1 551 early learning services, 11 tertiary providers and over 700 000 learners (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2024[122]).
>
> Sources: OECD (2019[60]), *Working and Learning Together: Rethinking Human Resource Policies for Schools*, https://doi.org/10.1787/b7aaf050-en; and New Zealand Ministry of Education (2024[122]), *Communities of Learning | Kāhui Ako*, https://www.education.govt.nz/communities-of-learning (accessed 15 June 2019).

Focus capacity-building efforts on priority areas both in and around DEIS schools

Enhancing educational quality and equity with limited resources requires Ireland to focus its capacity-building efforts where they are needed the most – both in terms of their recipients and in terms of their substantive focus. This requires a strategic reflection on the role of DEIS schools within a wider ecosystem of support and the types of intervention that are best provided through a multi-disciplinary approach. Further intensive support should be targeted to students and schools with the highest levels of needs. To ensure that resources in schools are used effectively, Ireland should further strengthen schools' capacity for evidence-based improvement by investing in structures that can facilitate their collection and effective use of data. Collectively, these efforts could strengthen the capacity of DEIS schools while ensuring that the needs of students at greatest risk of educational disadvantage are met regardless of the school they attend.

> *Take a strategic approach to capacity building that reflects DEIS schools' role within a wider ecosystem of support*

Meeting the rising and more complex needs of students and living up to a holistic vision of teaching and learning will require a continued emphasis on capacity building in Ireland's schools – particularly those serving the most disadvantaged students. Yet, the OECD review team's interviews with stakeholders have highlighted that schools' capacity to meet learners' needs critically depends on a wider ecosystem of support. Schools are in a privileged position to serve as a hub for different actors to provide children with wrap-around support services or to direct those in need to appropriate sources of external support. Yet, there are limits to schools' capacity and responsibility for providing support to students and parents in an environment that is characterised by significant capacity shortages across a range of social services.

While schools will undoubtedly benefit from further capacity in key areas of student support (see below), some of the challenges identified in schools (e.g. concerning their ability to provide therapeutic interventions) cannot be addressed by teachers and further CPL alone but require additional external capacity. A strategic student-centred approach to capacity building should be based on a reflection on the types of student support schools are best placed to provide themselves and for which students should be referred to other providers. As discussed in Chapter 2, alleviating the burden placed on schools and

providing effective support to students will require an increased emphasis on interdisciplinary, joint-up work across a range of agencies. Improved inter-agency collaboration and communication are needed to systematically keep track of students' needs and the support they receive across a range of providers, identify additional needs and intervene as or before they arise. Likewise, strengthening schools' capacity for data analysis and evidence-informed improvement should not only involve training for school staff but also support provided at a higher level to multiple schools (see Chapter 6 for a detailed discussion).

The OECD review team has encountered several promising initiatives seeking to address capacity shortages through multi-disciplinary collaboration and partnerships that extend beyond schools. The North East Inner City Multi-Disciplinary Team (NEIC MDT) in Dublin is one such example (Department of Education and NEPS, 2022[123]). Established in 2020, the NEIC MDT is based on an interagency collaboration between the Health Service Executive (HSE) and the DoE. The NEIC MDT comprises NEPS educational psychologists and HSE primary care, speech and language therapists, occupational therapists and psychologists. The multidisciplinary team supports ten primary schools in Dublin's city centre with quick access to wraparound therapeutic support, including advice and training for school staff and parents, preventative work, early intervention, assessment and on-site therapeutic interventions.

Another promising example of targeted external support for schools with the highest levels of need is the City Connects programme, which organises student support and leverages existing school and community-based resources to improve students' academic and social-emotional outcomes. City Connects is run jointly by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, the DoE, Boston College, TESS, Mary Immaculate College and funded by the NEIC Initiative (NEIC, 2020[124]). Starting in 2020/21, the programme has been piloted in ten primary schools in Dublin's NEIC area to provide all students in participating schools with a holistic assessment of their academic, socio-emotional, health and family needs, based on which they are provided with a tailored set of supports and enrichment opportunities (NEIC, 2023[125]).

The resource-intensity of measures like City Connects or NEIC MDT precludes their universal rollout, Ireland should consider which of them may be suited to complement the capacity of schools serving severely disadvantaged students beyond the NEIC area – subject to a rigorous evaluation of their effectiveness. A more flexible approach to targeting supports to students and schools – identified based on administrative data in collaboration with the Central Statistical Office, as discussed in Chapter 6 – could allow these additional supports to be targeted at a sub-group of the most disadvantaged DEIS schools, but also non-DEIS schools enrolling a smaller number of severely disadvantaged students.[9]

While many of the programmes described above require substantial resources, there is also some scope to strengthen schools' capacity for therapeutic support at a more limited additional cost by strengthening their position within the wider ecosystem of support. As described in Box 4.7, for example, schools in Limerick have collaborated with higher education institutions to provide professional placements to university students with a focus on therapy, benefiting both institutions. Transition Year Programme (see Chapter 5), which typically involves high-quality work placements in the community for participating students, is another comparatively low-cost initiative that enables schools to let their students benefit from opportunities and the capacity of actors around them. Initiatives such as these should be recorded and examined for their potential to be implemented at a larger scale.

Box 4.7. Collaborations with HEIs to provide therapeutic professional placements in primary schools

The Health Alliances for Practice-Based Professional Education and Engagement (HAPPEE) initiative in Ireland facilitates university students with a focus on therapy to complete their professional placements in primary schools. Starting with a pilot in 2021, primary schools in Limerick's regeneration communities have partnered with the University of Limerick (UL) to facilitate students completing their therapeutic professional placements in schools (as opposed to clinical settings). The placements last eight to ten weeks and are professionally supervised by clinical supervisors of the St Gabriel's Foundation. They are open to students of physiotherapy, speech and language therapy, and occupational therapy. With funding from the Economic and Social Intervention Fund and support from UL, the St Gabriel's Foundation and Limerick City and County Council, HAPPEE now covers six schools. In 2021, 142 school students benefited from the universal, targeted or individual support interventions provided through the HAPPEE placements. In the 2023/24 school year, UL provided 21 student placements across its six partner schools (on average, two students for each discipline) and 542 school students benefited from the interventions.

Source: University of Limerick (2022[126]), Health Alliances for Practice-Based Professional Education and Engagement (HAPPEE), https://www.ul.ie/news/be-happee-ul-school-intervention-programme-improves-outcomes-for-children-in-regeneration (accessed on 30 May 2024); Information provided by University of Limerick and partner schools.

Target capacity-building efforts to support teachers and school leaders in areas of greatest need

Given the limited resources, Ireland should seek to target its capacity building efforts to support teachers and school leaders in areas of greatest need. Data generated through school inspections provide an invaluable source of information in this process and *Oide* should build on the close relationship that the previous four learning support services had established with the Inspectorate. A close relationship with the Inspectorate should continue to ensure that the professional learning offer is aligned with both central priorities and the challenges observed in schools. Close collaboration with *Oide* also helps the Inspectorate support schools in linking the implementation of their Action Plans to effective CPL – an area where the Inspectorate has identified scope for improvement in some DEIS schools (Department of Education, 2022[63]).

Some of the schools serving students with the highest levels of need may also need further support to strengthen their administrative capacity. School leaders in Ireland face demands across a wide range of domains that require significant administrative, managerial and pedagogical competencies. To be able to fulfil their role and devote sufficient time to pedagogical leadership (including a stronger emphasis on teacher appraisal and leadership in school-based professional learning), school leaders in the most challenging schools would benefit from a more distributed approach to leadership and reinforced administrative support. This could involve lowering the enrolment threshold for secretary positions or administrative deputy principals in selected schools. The identification of eligible schools should follow transparent and rigorous criteria, which could be identified as part of a greater differentiation in the supports provided to DEIS schools with different levels of disadvantage (see Chapter 3).

Beyond strengthening their administrative capacity, school leadership teams in selected schools might benefit from additional peer-support and a more systematic exchange with other schools. Some of the school leaders interviewed by the OECD review team were involved in local support groups for principals and deputy principals (often meeting in local Education Support Centres). Yet, there was little structural

support to foster exchange and professional peer-learning on the specific issues faced by the school leaders of DEIS schools. Particularly in rural areas, professional learning communities bringing together the leadership teams of DEIS schools around shared challenges could be an important step to combat a risk of professional isolation and ensure that effective practices spread through the system.

Several OECD countries have created structures for peer learning and collaboration with a focus on disadvantaged and struggling schools, which may provide inspiration for Ireland (Box 4.8). In Ireland, the former Centre for School Leadership, whose work is now subsumed under the remit of *Oide*, has trained a number of recently retired school leaders to provide "bespoke mentoring" support to principals who are facing difficulties in their schools (CSL, 2022[127]). Ireland could build on this experience and explore further ways to incentivise highly effective in-service school leaders to act as mentors for less experienced or struggling peers and provide them with informal support and advice on pedagogical leadership.

Providing such opportunities to in-service school leaders could also contribute to their continuing professional improvement and encourage them to update their skills and take on new challenges, even at advanced stages of their careers. Similar mentorship-based approaches should be explored to intensify the preparation of HSCL Coordinators. More systematic contact with experienced peers – in addition to the regular HSCL cluster meetings – could be an effective way to ensure that the growing number of HSCL Coordinators are well-supported as take on their new roles.

Box 4.8. Collaborative improvement and professional learning communities for school leaders

Professional learning community of school leaders in disadvantaged schools in Northern Ireland

In Northern Ireland (United Kingdom), head teachers from schools in West Belfast, one of the country's most socio-economically disadvantaged communities, have established a professional learning community to improve student learning outcomes. School leaders work together to identify common issues and areas for improvement across all schools, establishing dedicated sub-groups to work on the specific points identified. School leaders can also visit schools where good practices have been identified and can participate in joint training. The increased collaboration among schools has been associated with improvements in student learning outcomes (OECD, 2023[105]).

Collaboration for School Improvement in Sweden

Sweden's *Samverkan för bästa skola* (Collaboration for School Improvement) programme was established by the National Agency of Education to support schools with low student achievement scores and graduation rates in improving student learning outcomes. As part of the programme, school leaders and school boards work in partnership with the National Agency for Education and universities to develop school improvement plans and receive guidance and support from university researchers in the plans' implementation (Glaés-Coutts and Nilsson, 2021[128]; Brussino, 2021[52]).

Source: Adapted from OECD (2023[105]), *Equity and Inclusion in Education: Finding Strength through Diversity*, https://doi.org/10.1787/e9072e21-en.

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Notes

[1] In Ireland, the term "school leader(s)" is typically used to refer to any staff with formal leadership roles in schools, including teachers with posts of responsibility (i.e. Principals, Deputy Principals and Assistant Principals I & II). In this document, the term is used to refer to principals, unless stated otherwise.

[2] Section 24 of the Education Act 1998, as amended by the Education (Amendment) Act 2012.

[3] For a brief period from 1978 to 1982, secretaries in larger schools were employed as public servants on permanent full-time contracts by the Department of Education. Since 1985, they have been employed directly by schools, leading to a dual labour market with different pay and contract conditions.

[4] This analysis is restricted to schools with the modal ISCED level for 15-year-old students, i.e. ISCED 3 (upper-secondary education) in Ireland. Student-teacher ratios need to be interpreted with caution, insofar as the ratio may not reflect teacher absenteeism (OECD, 2023[12]). The PISA international definition of disadvantaged schools (the bottom quarter based on the school's students' average PISA index of economic, social and cultural status [ESCS]) is not identical to the DEIS status in Ireland.

[5] The Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST) has since been integrated into *Oide*.

[6] 40 DEIS Urban Band 1 primary schools and 38 DEIS Post-primary schools.

[7] In exceptional circumstances, should a Disciplinary Committee deem a teacher unfit to teach, their continued registration can be made conditional on the attendance of professional development courses (Government of Ireland, 2001[130]).

[8] As measured by the PISA index of students' economic, social and cultural status (ESCS).

[9] For example, 48% of Traveller students at the primary level attended non-DEIS schools in the school year 2020/21. Although this proportion has been reduced to an estimated 26% in the 2022/23 school year due to the expansion of the DEIS programme, a significant proportion of Traveller students would remain excluded from services exclusively provided through DEIS schools. At the post-primary level, an estimated 45% of Traveller students attended non-DEIS schools in 2022/23 (down from 51% since 2020/21) (Department of Education, 2023[129]).

5 School-level interventions to address educational disadvantage

This chapter examines policies to strengthen the support that is provided to foster equity in both DEIS and non-DEIS schools. It reviews the supports provided by the DEIS programme, highlighting its different areas of intervention, from academic to well-being supports. The chapter also provides an overview of the collaboration with parents and communities, the costs of schooling for families and the local responses to different needs. The chapter identifies strengths and challenges related to each of these policy areas and provides policy recommendations to address them. The overarching question addressed by the chapter is how to strengthen schools' ability to respond to the needs of their students, in particular those at risk of educational disadvantage, whether they are in DEIS or non-DEIS schools, and foster equity within each school.

Context and features

Challenges faced by disadvantaged students and their families

As discussed in Chapter 1, Ireland, similarly to other OECD countries, exhibits a socio-economic gap in academic performance in PISA[1] results. Moreover, data from Ireland show that a performance gap exists between Delivering Equality of Opportunity In Schools (DEIS) and non-DEIS schools, and in particular between DEIS Urban Band 1 and non-DEIS urban schools (Nelis and Gilleece, 2023[1]). Indeed, according to Ireland's National Assessments of Mathematics and English Reading (NAMER) 2021 results, the gaps between the scores of students in non-DEIS urban schools and those in DEIS Urban Band 1 schools were approximately twice as large as the differences between students in non-DEIS urban schools and DEIS Urban Band 2 schools (ibid.). Yet, there is also evidence suggesting that gaps between DEIS and non-DEIS schools, after taking into account a range of factors including socio-economic background of students, are decreasing over time, although this result only holds for mathematics and not reading in NAMER (Karakolidis et al., 2021[2]; Karakolidis et al., 2021[3]), and in mathematics and science in Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) (Duggan et al., 2023[4]).

To analyse the effectiveness of the supports for disadvantaged students and their families, and support their learning, it is key to understand the context in which schools operate, and the challenges that some households are facing. An overview of these issues is provided in a survey[2] from 2018 (Table 5.1) (Weir, 2018[5]). Emotional and behavioural problems among students were a common concern among the respondents, with three-quarters (74%) of the 319 interviewed Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) Coordinators specifying that this was a substantial issue in their schools. Over 90% of respondents reported encountering issues like persistent student absenteeism, inadequate nutrition, bullying/cyberbullying, poor oral language skills, family substance abuse, unemployment, substandard housing, parents' literacy/numeracy problems, and general family dysfunction. Significant challenges included deficient oral language skills (57%), community unemployment (56%), family dysfunction (55%), and on-going student absenteeism (53%). In contrast, organised crime (9.8%) and ethnic conflict (6.5%) were significant concerns in only a small minority of schools.

In line with the documented surge in homelessness in Ireland (see Chapter 1), particularly child homelessness, over two-thirds of respondents (68%) indicated that homelessness was a challenge faced by students and families in schools, with 53% acknowledging it to some extent and 16% recognising it as a significant issue.

Table 5.1. Prevalence of various challenges among students and families

Percentages of interviewed HSCL Coordinators indicating the extent of problems among the students/families served by the school (%).

	To a great extent	To some extent	Not at all
Emotional and behavioural problems of students	74.3	25.7	0.0
On-going pupil absenteeism	52.7	46.4	0.9
Diet (e.g. poor diet, malnutrition)	25.8	67.0	7.2
Bullying/cyber-bullying	19.9	74.4	5.7
Organised crime	9.8	43.3	46.9
Youth/petty crime (e.g. vandalism)	9.7	59.7	30.5
Poor oral language/vocabulary of students	57.1	37.8	5.1
Effects of substance abuse among students' families	25.6	65.5	8.9
Unemployment in the community	56.2	42.2	1.6
Ethnic conflict	6.5	52.4	41.1
Effects of general dysfunction among students' families	54.5	44.6	1.0
Poor quality of housing	22.9	69.2	7.9
Homelessness	15.7	52.7	31.6
Domestic violence	7.8	79.5	12.7
Literacy/numeracy problems amongst parents	42.9	56.8	0.3

Note: Based on 319 respondents among Home-School-Community Liaison (HSCL) Coordinators in primary and post-primary schools in Ireland.
Source: Weir (2018[5]), Partnership in DEIS schools: a survey of home-school-community liaison coordinators in primary and post-primary schools in Ireland, https://www.erc.ie/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/HSCL-report-2018.pdf (accessed on 3 January 2024).

A further challenge that students face relates to hunger and food insecurity. PISA 2022 data show that 7% of 15-year-old students in Ireland had experienced food insecurity, as they "did not eat at least once a week in the past 30 days, because there was not enough money to buy food", similar to the OECD average (8%) (OECD, 2023[6]). In particular, 4% of the 15-year-olds reported not eating every day or almost every day due to a lack of money for food, compared to 3% on average across OECD countries (ibid.). Hunger appears to be a challenge also for students in primary school, as data from Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) 2021 found that just over one in ten students in Ireland (11%) felt hungry every day on arrival at school, and a further 11% experienced this almost every day (Delaney et al., 2023[7]).

A focus on early leaving from education and training, retention and attendance

In Ireland, the Education (Welfare) Act (2000[8]) emphasises the promotion of school attendance, participation and retention. Section 22 mandates every school to have a statement of strategies to encourage regular attendance among students, and to keep attendance records for all their students. Ireland has implemented policy efforts to increase attendance and retention rates over the past decade. Early leaving from education and training (ELET) rates have been falling progressively in Ireland, from 9.9% in 2012 to 3.7% in 2022 (Eurostat, 2023[9]). This is substantially below the Europe 2030 national target of 9% and the European Union (EU) average (9.6%). However, certain groups, in particular Irish Traveller and Roma students, still have high ELET rates. Under the Irish National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy (2017-2021) (Department of Justice and Equality, 2017[10]), a set of actions are underway to close educational gaps for these groups, including establishing a multi-disciplinary pilot project to improve school attendance and retention.[3]

The improvement of retention and attendance rates is seen as a central aim of the DEIS programme and is the responsibility of each school, supported by the School Completion Programme (SCP) and HSCL

Scheme, described further below (Smyth et al., 2015[11]; Weir et al., 2018[12]). The DEIS planning process requires schools to set targets for improved attendance rates and to devise and implement strategies to achieve these targets.

According to the Chief Inspector report (Department of Education Inspectorate, 2022[13]), as of 2020, there had been little progress in increasing retention rates in DEIS Post-primary schools. This on-going trend has driven the inclusion of a key goal in DEIS 2017: to improve retention rates in DEIS Post-primary schools to match the national average by 2025. Yet, more recent data show some improvement in this regard. In 2014, the retention rate in DEIS Post-primary schools was 82.1%, and 85.0% in 2022 (Table 5.2). During the 2014-2020 period, the gap in retention to Leaving Certificate between DEIS and non-DEIS schools oscillated. While it decreased until 2016-17, the gap increased in 2019 (up to 9.3 percentage points) and subsequently subsided in 2022 to 8.4 percentage points (Deparment of Education, 2023[14]).

Table 5.2. Retention rates in DEIS Post-primary schools: 2014-2021

	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Retention rate in DEIS Post-primary schools Leaving Certificate completion	82.1%	82.7%	84.4%	85.0%	84.7%	83.8%	84.8%	86.1%	85.0%
Gap in retention rates - DEIS vs non-DEIS post-primary schools	10.5	9.3	8.5	8.5	8.7	9.3	8.6	7.6	8.4

Source: Department of Education (2023[14]), Education Indicators for Ireland 2022, https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/055810-education-statistics/#latest-statistical-reports (accessed on 1 February 2024); Department of Education (2024[15]), Education Indicators for Ireland 2023, https://www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/289901/66bf9068-8a83-4bf8-86d4-d3aba60ef7d1.pdf#page=null (accessed 22 April 2024).

Attendance is also a key focus area of the DEIS programme. The Department of Education (DoE) collaborates with the Tusla Education Support Service (TESS) in relation to the promotion of school attendance, participation and retention among primary and post-primary students. TESS comprises three strands: the statutory Educational Welfare Service[4] (EWS) and the two school support services: the HSCL Scheme and the School Completion Programme (described in the section below). To strengthen these measures and combat the dropping rates of school attendance post-pandemic, TESS launched a national school attendance campaign in partnership with the DoE (Department of Education, 2023[16]). The campaign is underpinned by a webinar series with six sessions running throughout the school year 2023/24. Sessions are focused on attendance and consist of a collaborative initiative led by TESS including NEPS, the Inspectorate, DoE, school principals, with the support of international experts (ibid.).

The analysis of school attendance by TESS raises concerns, particularly in relation to DEIS schools. A report based on 2018/19 data found that non-attendance, 20-day cumulative absences, expulsions and suspensions were highest among DEIS Urban Band 1 schools (when compared to DEIS Urban Band 2 schools, non-DEIS urban schools, DEIS Rural schools and non-DEIS rural schools) (Tusla, 2022[17]; Department of Education Inspectorate, 2022[13]). DEIS Urban Band 2 schools generally had the second highest rates on these measures. In relation to post-primary schools, the report found that non-attendance, 20-day absences, expulsions and suspensions were significantly and substantially higher among DEIS Post-primary schools compared with non-DEIS post-primary schools (ibid.). As of 2020, school attendance in DEIS primary and post-primary schools remained a concern (Department of Education Inspectorate, 2022[13]).

Attendance data are mandatorily reported by schools twice a year for those students with serious attendance issues that have been identified during the current academic year; i.e. students who were absent for a cumulative total of 20 days or more falling within the following categories (TESS, 2023[18]):

- Illness
- Urgent Family Reason
- Holiday
- Suspended
- Other
- Unexplained

Schools should not report children with fewer than 20 days of reported absences (TESS, 2023[18]). Only children aged six years old or older and children who have not reached the age of 16 years or have not completed three years of post-primary education, whichever occurs later, should be reported. In addition, many schools monitor their attendance data through the school's on-going pastoral care support and frequently have attendance as a priority among the duties of the school management members (Government of Ireland, 2000[8]).

Greater learning needs in DEIS schools

DEIS schools accommodate a higher concentration of students with greater learning needs compared to non-DEIS schools. According to principal reports in PISA 2018, almost a quarter of students in DEIS Post-primary schools (one-seventh in non-DEIS post-primary schools) had special educational needs[5] (Nelis et al., 2021[19]). Three-fifths of students in DEIS schools (one-fifth in non-DEIS schools) were reported by principals to come from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds. When considering the PISA ESCS[6] index, data confirm the gap between DEIS and non-DEIS schools: while two-fifths of students in DEIS schools were in the lower ESCS quartile, only one-fifth of students in non-DEIS schools had scores in this range.

Moreover, principal reports highlighted learning challenges linked to complications in student behaviour (Nelis et al., 2021[19]). Compared to their counterparts in non-DEIS schools and the OECD average, principals in DEIS Post-primary schools were more inclined to report that aspects of student behaviour posed obstacles to learning. Over three-quarters of students (as opposed to half in non-DEIS post-primary schools and over one-third on average across OECD countries) in DEIS schools had principals indicating that unauthorised student absence hindered learning. Widespread hindrances in DEIS schools included students not being attentive (67% in DEIS schools, compared to 34% in non-DEIS schools, and 59% on average across OECD countries). Moreover, for about one-fifth of students in DEIS schools, principals identified student use of alcohol and drugs, lack of respect for teachers, and bullying as impediments to learning (ibid.).

The Inspectorate identified, through student surveys, another barrier to learning: a considerable decline in enthusiasm for learning between primary and post-primary for students attending DEIS schools (Department of Education Inspectorate, 2022[13]). Only 50% of students in DEIS schools at the post-primary level reported that they liked coming to school, while the corresponding figure for students in DEIS schools at the primary level was 68%.

Supports available to DEIS schools

As discussed throughout this report, the DEIS programme aims at providing resources to the schools with the largest concentration of disadvantaged students. To do so, the programme provides a range of supports aimed at addressing the various needs that are driven by socio-economic disadvantage. The various supports are outlined in Table 1.3. This section describes those that target and support students

directly at the school level. For this reason, planning, administrative and professional learning supports are not a focus of this chapter specifically.

Table 5.3. DEIS supports across different Bands

	DEIS Urban Band 1 primary	DEIS Urban Band 2 primary	DEIS Rural primary	DEIS Post-primary
Smaller class size	X			
Administrative/deputy principal (AP/DP)	X (AP on an enrolment of 113 students; DP on an enrolment of 500 students)	X (AP on an enrolment of 136 students)		X (additional DP allocated at lower enrolment threshold (600 students))
DEIS grant allocation	X	X	X	X
HSCL Scheme	X	X		X
School Meals Programme	X	X	X	X
School Completion Programme	X	X		X
Literacy/numeracy supports	X	X		
Action planning supports	X	X	X	X
Continuing professional learning supports	X	X	X	X
Priority access to NEPS	X	X	X	X
Leaving Certificate Applied	N/A	N/A	N/A	X
School Books Grant Scheme	N/A	N/A	N/A	X (Senior Cycle, otherwise parents do not pay for school books)

Note: The table aims to provide an overview of some of the main supports, not an exhaustive nuanced list. HSCL = Home School Community Liaison (see Chapter 5 for more information). Administrative principals (AP) are exempt from teaching duties. The enrolment threshold for appointing a deputy principal (DP) exempt from teaching duties is set at 573 students for other than DEIS Urban Band 1 schools. Chapters 2-4 provide additional details about these supports.
Source: Department of Education (2023[20]), DEIS Delivering Equality of Opportunity In Schools, https://www.gov.ie/en/policy-information/4018ea-deis-delivering-equality-of-opportunity-in-schools/ (accessed on 1 December 2023).

Some measures, such as the smaller class size, apply only to DEIS Urban Band 1 primary schools (Department of Education, 2024[21]). While the primary staffing schedule operates on the basis of a general average of one classroom teacher for every 23 students for the 2023/24 school year, a lower threshold applies for DEIS Urban Band 1 schools. Staffing arrangements in DEIS Urban Band 1 primary schools for the 2023/24 school year are 17:1 for junior schools, 19:1 for vertical schools and 21:1 for senior schools. This follows three improvements in the staffing schedules for schools since 2021. Detailed information on the allocation of teachers to schools is published each year (Department of Education, 2024[21]).

While in non-DEIS primary schools an administrative principal is appointed on an enrolment of 169 students, in DEIS Urban Band 1, the appointment is for every 113 students; for DEIS Urban Band 2, for every 136 students (Department of Education, 2024[21]).

The Home School Community Liaison Scheme

The HSCL Scheme, initiated through a pilot programme in 1990, has been extended several times since then (1991, 1999, 2005 and 2017) under DEIS (Tusla, 2021[22]). Introduced as a pilot project, funding was initially allocated for the appointment of 31 teachers as HSCL Coordinators in 55 primary schools in disadvantaged areas (Weir et al., 2018[12]). The scheme aims to improve educational outcomes for the

students most at risk of poor attendance, participation and retention. This is achieved by working with the parents or guardians of students who are experiencing, or are likely to experience, educational disadvantages. Indeed, the HSCL Scheme promotes partnerships between parents and teachers to enhance students' learning opportunities and retention in the education system. The programme also puts great emphasis on collaboration with the local community (ibid.).

Operational responsibility lies with TESS, while the DoE funds and allocates HSCL Coordinators. An integrated services model combines the HSCL Scheme with the School Completion Programme and the Educational Welfare Service. Professional learning for HSCL Coordinators is described in Chapter 4.

As of 2020, there were 415 HSCL Coordinators in post-primary and DEIS Urban primary schools. In the 2022-2023 school year the number of HSCL Coordinators increased from 418 in 521 DEIS schools to 528 in 688 DEIS schools (Department of Education, 2024[21]). In addition, HSCL provision was expanded to schools with non-DEIS status for the first time in the scheme's history. Ten HSCL Coordinators in 14 non-DEIS schools were appointed with the aim of providing support to schools with significant Traveller and Roma populations (under a pilot project described in the Strengths section of the chapter). This brought the total number of HSCL Coordinators to 540 and schools to 702 for the 2022-2023 academic year.

The primary role of the HSCL Coordinator is to work with the salient adult(s) in the child's life, in order to improve educational outcomes for the child (Weir et al., 2018[12]). The focus of the role is to improve the attendance, participation and retention of children in the education system, by providing both universal and targeted supports. An HSCL Coordinator is a teacher from a participatory school who is released from teaching duties, for a maximum of five years, in order to work intensively with and provide support to parents and guardians. They engage in full-time liaison work between the home, the school and the community. The scheme operates in a spirit of partnership and collaboration with parents and teachers, while at the same time, being part of an on-going and wider integrated services approach to children's educational welfare (Weir et al., 2018[12]).

The five main aims of the HSCL Scheme are (Weir et al., 2018[12]):

1. To maximise active participation of the children in the schools of the scheme in the learning process, in particular those who might be at risk of failure;

2. To promote active co-operation between home, school and relevant community agencies in promoting the educational interests of the children;

3. To raise awareness among parents of their own capacities to enhance their children's educational progress and to assist them in developing relevant skills;

4. To enhance the children's uptake from education, their retention in the education system, their continuation to post-compulsory education and to the third level and their attitudes towards life-long learning; and

5. To disseminate the positive outcomes of the scheme throughout the school system generally.

The HSCL Coordinator assumes multiple responsibilities aligned with fostering collaboration between parents and teachers, implementing innovative strategies to address educational disadvantage, and incorporating parental involvement into the school development process (Tusla, 2021[22]). The principal duties of the HSCL Coordinator encompass establishing frameworks to identify parental needs, compiling and regularly reviewing a targeted list in consultation with relevant stakeholders, and actively involving parents in supporting their children's education. The coordinator plays a pivotal role in facilitating smooth transitions across various educational stages, spanning from early childhood to primary, primary to post-primary, and post-primary to further and higher education.

To establish trust and enhance parental engagement, the HSCL Coordinator conducts home visits, encouraging parents to actively participate in their child's education and disseminating information about school and community services (Tusla, 2021[22]). Additionally, the coordinator monitors the efficacy of

interventions in line with the schools' DEIS plan and identifies potential parent leaders who can contribute to the activities of the HSCL Scheme and serve as valuable resources for other parents.

School Meals Programme

In Ireland, the School Meals Programme is under the remit of the Department of Social Protection and provides funding towards the provision of food services to some 1 600 schools and organisations benefitting 260 000 children (Department of Education, 2024[21]). The objective of the programme is to provide regular, nutritious food to children to support them in taking full advantage of the education provided to them. The programme is an important component of policies to encourage school attendance and extra educational achievement (Department of Education, 2024[21]). Schools need to apply to the School Meals Programme, and priority is given to schools that are in the DEIS programme.

As of September 2023, all DEIS primary schools are entitled to a hot meal, while DEIS Post-primary schools receive a cold meal daily[7] (at the school's choice of either lunch or breakfast). The Hot School Meals Programme was introduced in 2019 as a small pilot of 30 schools. The Minister announced that from April 2024, that this scheme would be offered to all primary schools. Approximately, 900 primary schools applied for inclusion in the Hot Meals Programme, which will bring the total number of schools receiving hot meals to 1 400 (Department of Social Protection, 2023[23]).

The School Completion Programme

The DEIS programme has a strong focus on the attendance and retention of disadvantaged students. The SCP is a targeted programme of support for primary and post-primary children and young people who have been identified as potentially at risk of early leaving from education and training, or who are out of school and have not successfully transferred to an alternative learning site or employment (Department of Education, 2024[21]).

The desired impact of the SCP is retention of a young person to completion of the Leaving Certificate, equivalent qualification or suitable level of educational attainment which enables them to transition into further education, training or employment. SCP, together with the HSCL Scheme and the statutory EWS, focus on improving children's school attendance, participation and retention.

There are 121 SCP projects nationally, providing support to DEIS schools in Bands 1 and 2, and to DEIS Post-primary schools (see Table 1.3). Each project is staffed by an SCP Coordinator and Project Worker(s) and managed by a Local Management Committee, comprising of principals and other education and/or community stakeholders.

SCP projects provide a broad range of evidence-based and evidence-informed programmes, practices and supports to children and young people at risk of educational disadvantage, together with individualised responses to educational welfare needs. SCP provides support to children and young people in primary schools, post-primary schools and to those not in full-time education/not in school. SCP offers three distinct types of interventions: targeted interventions for children and young people with significant educational welfare needs; brief interventions for those requiring immediate short-term support; and evidence based and evidence-informed interventions at a universal level for whole classes or large groups.

To support young people at different stages of their learning, SCP supports are provided in different settings: in-school, after-school, out-of-school and holiday provision (see Table 5.4). Interventions in all settings aim to address the educational welfare needs of children and young people and to promote regular school attendance, engagement with the curriculum and the school community, and retention within the education setting.

As shown in Table 5.4, in-school supports concern different activities, such as transition programmes between school levels or targeted attendance tracking. After-school supports focus on strengthening

academic performance and well-being through homework, sports, clubs, and other activities and programmes. During holiday time, SCP Coordinators run activities such as summer or other holiday programmes. Outside of school, for instance, SCP Coordinators provide individualised support, and collaborate with the community and other agencies to support the students.

Table 5.4. Supports provided through the School Completion Programme, by category

In School	After School
Transition programmes	Homework groups
Targeted attendance tracking	Study groups
Mentoring	After-school clubs (i.e. art, sports etc.)
Pro-social skills	
Decision making skills	
Behaviour management	
Restorative practice	
Social and emotional resilience	
Communication skills	
Self-care (e.g. hygiene, sleep hygiene)	
Organisation skills	
Motivational interviewing	
Breakfast clubs	
Lunch time clubs	
One-to-one individualised supports	
Small-group targeted work	
Universal evidence-based/informed preventative programmes	
Out of School	**Holiday Provision**
Individualised supports	Summer programmes
Motivational interviewing	Mid-term programmes
Restorative practice	Easter programmes
Advocacy	
Social and emotional resilience	
Suspension intervention	
Family support	
Collaborative approaches with community and/or statutory agencies	

Source: Department of Education (2024[21]), OECD Review of resourcing schools to address educational disadvantage: Country Background Report Ireland, Department of Education, Dublin, Ireland, https://s3-eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/govieassets/296017/4d1ac422-5475-470e-b910-4c80a83c43bc.pdf.

School Books Grant Scheme

A further support provided through the DEIS programme is the enhanced rate of funding under the School Books Grant Scheme.

Schools in the DEIS programme were always allocated a higher rate of funding to support the purchase of schoolbooks. As part of Budget 2023, the DoE launched a programme of over EUR 50 million (euros) to provide free books to primary school students within the Free Education Scheme[8] from September 2023 (Department of Education, 2024[21]). This measure aims at eliminating the cost to these families for all schoolbooks at primary school, including workbooks. It delivers on the Programme for Government commitment to extend the free schoolbook pilot, currently in 102 DEIS primary schools, as resources permit. The primary free School Books Grant Scheme benefits up to 540 000 students in approximately 3 240 recognised primary schools, including over 130 special schools. Moreover, the Budget 2024 allocated an additional EUR 67 million to provide free schoolbooks and classroom resources for Junior Cycle students in recognised post-primary schools in the Free Education Scheme for the school year

2024/25 (Department of Education, 2023[24]). This Junior Cycle Schoolbooks Scheme will remove the cost from families of funding schoolbooks, including eBooks, and core classroom resources for all Junior Cycle students in post-primary schools in the Free Education Scheme (Department of Education, 2024[25]). This will benefit some 212 000 students and add to the 558 000 children in primary and special schools who benefited from this initiative in the 2023/24 school year. DEIS post-primary schools will continue to receive a higher rate of schoolbook grant funding for Senior Cycle students (Department of Education, 2024[26]).

Literacy and numeracy programmes

DEIS is the first mainstream programme for disadvantage that has an explicit focus on providing literacy and numeracy supports to the students involved in it, and data collected suggest that the uptake of literacy and numeracy programmes has been universal and successful among DEIS schools (Weir et al., 2017[27]). The programme that DEIS offers targets early interventions in literacy and mathematics for students that are performing poorly. These interventions are: Reading Recovery; First Steps; Maths Recovery; and Ready, Set, Go Maths. These four programmes are based on international research and practice to incorporate effective practices in the classroom (see more in Table 5.5).

Table 5.5. Literacy and numeracy programmes accessed through DEIS

Programme	Description
First Steps	An educational resource developed in Western Australia to enhance student literacy outcomes in primary schools. It covers reading, writing, spelling and oral language, incorporating a diagnostic framework for assessing children's progress. The resource encourages a whole-school approach, where teachers assess and monitor literacy development, aligning it with appropriate teaching strategies. In Ireland, it was selected for DEIS Urban schools to support literacy development. Trained tutors disseminate the practices throughout the school, aligning with the English Curriculum objectives.
Reading Recovery	Originating in New Zealand, Reading Recovery is a research-based early intervention to prevent reading failure. Developed by Marie Clay, it provides one-on-one lessons for struggling readers, lasting 8-20 weeks. DEIS-designated schools nominate a staff member to train as a Reading Recovery teacher. This individualised approach supplements on-going literacy activities in the classroom.
Maths Recovery	Developed in New South Wales, Maths Recovery is an early intervention programme focusing on the number aspect of mathematics. Specialist teachers work with low-attaining children from first class for 10-15 weeks, tailoring lessons to each student's progress. Similar to Reading Recovery, DEIS-designated schools nominate a staff member to train as a Maths Recovery teacher.
Ready, Set, Go, Maths	Developed in Northern Ireland (United Kingdom), the programme targets teachers of infant classes, emphasising early number skills and concepts. It was designed by Eunice Pitt, rooted in a two-year action research project. Teachers in DEIS schools receive training and are expected to implement the programme in line with Mathematics Curriculum objectives.

Source: Professional Development Service for Teachers (n.d.[28]), DEIS Literacy and Numeracy Programmes, https://pdst.ie/node/378 (accessed on 21 December 2023).

Access to the Leaving Certificate Applied

While not exclusive to the DEIS programme, access to the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) is considered an important support measure for students in DEIS schools. The LCA Programme serves as an alternative pathway designed to cater to diverse learning needs, and targets particularly students at risk of early leaving from education and training (Department of Education, 2024[21]). The LCA leads to a two-year Leaving Certificate, available to students who wish to follow a practical or vocationally oriented programme. The LCA is made up of a range of courses that are structured round three elements: Vocational Preparation, Vocational Education and General Education. The programme emphasises cross-curricular work, tasks and projects, along with personal and social development. A minimum level of attendance is required for the LCA programme, and this is intended to encourage young people following the LCA programme to attend regularly (Curriculum Online, 2022[29]).

Well-being supports

A broad range of supports, resources and professional learning opportunities are provided to help schools promote well-being and resilience by the DoE support services, including by the NEPS. The services assist schools in providing universal support at the level of the whole school or classroom, more targeted support for some children and young people who may be at risk, and more individualised support for those with the greatest need.

DEIS schools receive priority access to some of the programmes delivered by NEPS to improve student well-being. While these training programmes are not provided exclusively to DEIS schools, they are an important part of the support that DEIS schools receive. The two main programmes, prioritised by NEPS for delivery to DEIS schools, are the FRIENDS Resilience programmes (Fun Friends, Friends for Life and My Friends Youth) and the Incredible Years Teacher Classroom Management Programme (IYTCM) (see Chapter 4). The FRIENDS programmes are school-based anxiety-prevention and resilience-building programmes, while IYTCM is a classroom-based prevention and early-intervention programme designed to develop effective classroom management skills, reduce challenging behaviours and promote children's pro-social behaviour (Department of Education, n.d.[30]). In relation to the FRIENDS programmes, data show that these programmes are indeed more accessible to students in DEIS urban primary schools than non-DEIS urban schools. While 88% of sixth-class students in DEIS Urban Band 1 schools and 100% of those in DEIS Urban Band 2 schools had principals reporting having access to these programmes, 80% of the students in non-DEIS urban schools had access (Gilleece and Nelis, 2023[31]). This percentage decreased to 50% when considering access to IYTCM for teachers in non-DEIS urban schools, compared to 81% and 82% for teachers in DEIS Urban Band 1 and DEIS Urban Band 2 schools (ibid.).

The Continuum of Support

Ireland recognises the learning needs of diverse students in its education system, and has established learning supports beyond the DEIS provision. The Continuum of Support is the official DoE approach for both primary and post-primary schools. The Continuum of Support framework is used by schools to guide the identification of children and young people's strengths and needs, and to monitor their response to intervention (Department of Education, 2017[32]). It recognises that children and young people require different levels of support depending on their identified educational needs, and those needs may change over time. Using this framework helps ensure that interventions are incremental, moving from class-based interventions to more intensive and individualised support, and that they are informed by careful monitoring and review of response to intervention (ibid.).

Using the Continuum of Support framework helps ensure flexible and timely allocation of supports, so that those children and young people with the greatest level of need have access to the greatest level of support. A diagnosis of disability is not required to access supports, and both DEIS and non-DEIS schools operate under the Continuum of Support policy.

The foundational three distinct school-based processes, can be summarised as follows:

- **Whole-School Support-All** involves a whole-school approach to responding to the needs of all children and young people in primary and post-primary schools, including those with special educational needs, using universal, preventative and proactive approaches.

  and

  Classroom Support-All is the first response, led by the class teacher, when concerns emerge in relation to a child or young person's learning, well-being and/or social-emotional development. The provision of Classroom Support-All is the responsibility of the class teacher.

- **School Support-Some** involves the provision of additional targeted teaching and learning supports in response to the special educational needs[9] of small groups and/or individual children and young people.
- **School Support Plus-Few** involves the provision of highly individualised, intensive, targeted and specialised additional teaching and learning supports for children and young people, whose special educational needs are enduring, and significantly impact on their learning and participation in the school environment.

The three-tiered structure of the Continuum of Support is outlined in Figure 5.1.

Figure 5.1. The Continuum of Support
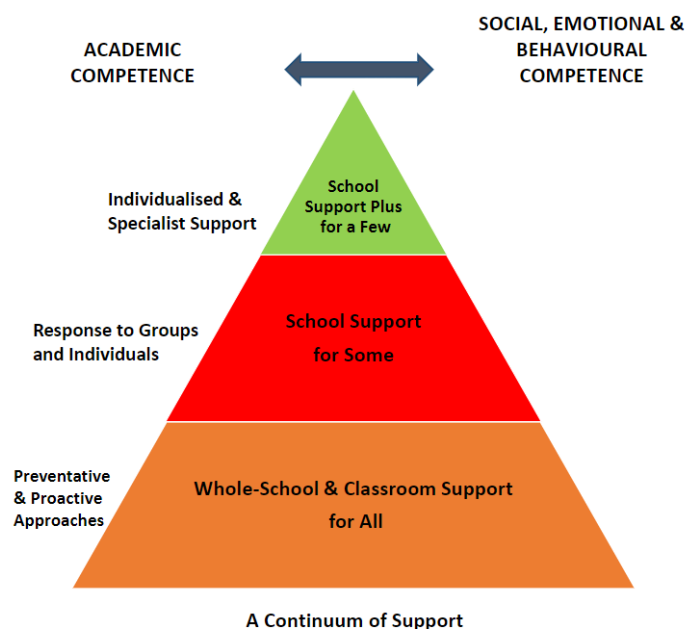
Source: Department of Education (2017[32]), Guidelines for Primary Schools – Supporting Pupils with Special Educational Needs in Mainstream Schools, https://www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/86911/e2ab0e65-f360-45a4-8075-37a4123838c3.pdf#page=null (accessed on 24 April 2024).

The Continuum of Support serves as a problem-solving model for assessing and intervening in educational settings, allowing schools to collect, analyse and respond to the diverse needs of all children and young people (Department of Education, 2024[21]).

The framework facilitates incremental interventions, starting with mainstream, class-based support for mild or transient needs and progressing to more intensive levels at the School Support and School Support Plus tiers. It emphasises continuous progress monitoring, with targeted intervention plans documented in student support files at all levels (ibid.). A four-step, cyclical problem-solving process is the approach used by schools to identify needs, plan, monitor and review response to intervention, where concerns arise in relation to a child or young person (Department of Education, 2017[32]). The problem-solving process is applied across the Continuum of Support to ensure that interventions and supports are aligned to the identified needs of the child or young person, and are reviewed regularly. A collaborative approach is adopted, involving the whole school community, including children and young people, teachers, and parents/guardians working together proactively. External agencies, including NEPS, National Council for Special Education (NCSE), and allied health professionals, may also be involved, where appropriate, in this collaborative process.

As per current guidance, the primary responsibility for student progress and care rests with the classroom teacher, supported closely by special education teachers (SETs). Since the 1980s, a core principle in the DoE provision for children with special educational needs is that the classroom teacher is considered the lead practitioner supported by other staff. NEPS and NCSE provide resources to aid schools in implementing the Continuum of Support, enhancing teachers' capacity for evidence-based interventions in literacy, numeracy, and social and emotional aspects (Department of Education, 2024[21]).

Since 2017, the Continuum of Support has been increasingly integrated into teachers' planning practices for both groups and individuals. Schools employ various support models, including withdrawals and in-class support, based on the identified needs of each child or young person (ibid).

Strengths

Ireland's system of school-based support possesses several strengths that can be leveraged to help students in reaching their full potential and promoting greater equity and inclusion among both DEIS and non-DEIS schools. The following are particularly relevant to the promotion of equity and inclusion at the school level.

The supports provided by DEIS are highly regarded and sought after by schools

The OECD review team met various stakeholders across education levels (outlined in Annex C), to gauge perceptions of the DEIS programme and broader opinions on supports for students at risk of educational disadvantage.

Evaluations have demonstrated that many of these supports significantly enhance student outcomes, reflecting their beneficial impact on learning (see more in the next sections). Programmes like Reading Recovery have been shown to enhance literacy skills among the least proficient students, offering both immediate benefits and sustained improvement over time (Holliman and Hurry, 2013[33]), although more recent evidence on the programme is questioning the long-term validity of the intervention (Gilleece and Clerkin, 2024[34]). Similarly, initiatives such as the Math Recovery and the Incredible Years Teacher Classroom Management Programme have demonstrated substantial gains in numeracy and positive behavioural changes, respectively (Smith et al., 2013[35]; Tang et al., 2022[36]). These findings underscore the programmes' roles in effectively supporting students' academic development and well-being, aligning with broader educational objectives to improve learner outcomes as part of the DEIS programme.

Moreover, through the interviews, the OECD review team gained the impression that the supports provided through the DEIS programme are highly regarded and sought after, not only by teachers and principals, but also by families. Families' attitudes towards the DEIS programme, however, are not universally positive, as discussed in Chapter 6 in relation to the stigma that is at times associated with the DEIS label. Yet, the overall response of schools to the DEIS programme has been positive, in that schools have placed high value on the supports provided through the Plan, along with developing actions in line with the Action Plan (Weir, 2018[5]; Nelis, Gilleece and Dinh, Forthcoming[37]).

The supports that the DEIS programme provides to schools (with differences across Bands, as described above), are quite comprehensive and aim at ensuring schools a range of means to support their students' learning, along with their well-being (Department of Education, 2017[38]). The OECD review team gained the impression that school staff appreciated the various DEIS resources, both in terms of the flexibility provided by the grant and by the targeted resources provided through the other supports. While stakeholders often referred to the HSCL Scheme as a significant driver of change, other advantages mentioned included the provision of hot school meals in primary schools, and the value of the literacy and numeracy supports (Weir, 2018[5]).

The next sections provide more detailed evidence on the perception of the stakeholders towards the more prominent of the DEIS supports, including any existing evidence on the effectiveness of these supports.

The Home School Community Liaison Scheme

The HSCL Scheme is widely appreciated within the education system. This programme, outlined above, had some promising results already in the 1990s. These included "improved behaviour, improved school attendance, improved scholastic achievement, greater care in their schoolwork, and more positive attitude to school and teachers, to themselves and to their parents" (Archer and Shortt, 2003, p. 76[39]).

The HSCL Coordinators have an important role in supporting parents and the wider community, and are able to increase parents' involvement in various school-related activities. The OECD review team was informed by parents and schools that HSCL Coordinators were able to arrange for activities that would encourage parents to visit the school more often, support them in learning different skills and address challenges at home, and help with scholastic activities. A survey of HSCL Coordinators[10] (Weir, 2018[5]) supports this view, with more than 95% of the coordinators reported that parents' involvement in all but two of the ten parental involvement activities included in the question had been positively impacted by HSCL Coordinators' efforts, either to some extent or to a great extent (Table 5.6). For instance, 83% of Coordinators indicated that, to a great extent, parents felt less threatened by school and teachers as a result of the HSCL Scheme. The majority of Coordinators also indicated that, to a great extent, parents were more aware of their contribution to their children's education (66%), had a new interest in what is happening in school (62%) and visited the school more (62%) as a result of HSCL Coordinators' efforts. Unfortunately, a confirmation through parental surveys on the contributions of HSCL Coordinators, or other data that would measure the HSCL Scheme's objective involvement, are not available.

Table 5.6. Perceptions of HSCL Coordinators in regard to the extent of the impact of the HSCL Scheme on parents' involvement in activities

Percentage of HSCL Coordinators

	To a great extent	To some extent	Not at all
Visit the school more often (e.g. for coffee mornings)	61.2	37.2	1.6
Are more involved in their children's schoolwork	38	60.8	1.3
Have learned new parenting skills	35.8	63	1.3
Have learned to use new home management skills	18.3	66.9	14.8
Help with school activities (e.g. sport days, school tours)	41.1	40.8	18.1
Help with classroom activities (e.g. paired reading)	39	30.7	30.3
Are more confident about helping children with homework	33.9	61.3	4.8
Feel less threatened by school and teachers	83.3	16.4	0.3
Are more aware of their contribution to their children's education	65.6	34.1	0.3
Have a new interest in what is happening in school	62.1	37.2	0.6

Source: Weir (2018[5]), Partnership in DEIS schools: a survey of home-school-community liaison coordinators in primary and post-primary schools in Ireland, https://www.erc.ie/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/HSCL-report-2018.pdf (accessed on 3 January 2024).

Moreover, in the survey, the Coordinators were also asked to indicate the extent to which their efforts had impacted the local community in a number of ways. In relation to all but one of the listed potential effects (as shown in Table 5.7), over 90% of Coordinators indicated that the HSCL Scheme had impacted these to at least some extent. For example, 92% Coordinators indicated that there was greater community spirit as a result of HSCL Coordinators' efforts, either to a great extent (34%) or to some extent (58%). A somewhat lower proportion (70%) agreed that transfer of students to third level had increased as a result of the Scheme, with an additional 24% indicating that they did not know whether this had been the case.

While these data cannot provide an objective portrait of the impact of HSCL Coordinators on families and communities, they can provide an indication of the areas that the Coordinators are able to influence. Moreover, their own perception of effectiveness can also suggest areas for improvement or focus for future developments in school.

Table 5.7. Perceptions of HSCL Coordinators in regard to the extent of the impact of the HSCL Scheme on the local community

Percentage of HSCL Coordinators

	To a great extent	To some extent	Not at all	Don't know
Greater community spirit	33.5	58.4	1.9	6.1
Better co-operation between agencies	57.7	39.1	1.0	2.2
Increased parent confidence and involvement	72.4	26.3	0.3	1.0
Greater use of community facilities and services	43.6	52.9	1.3	2.2
Role of the school in the community is more important	51.7	44.1	0.6	3.5
Greater transfer to third level	27.3	42.4	3.2	27.0

Source: Weir (2018[5]), Partnership in DEIS schools: a survey of home-school-community liaison coordinators in primary and post-primary schools in Ireland, https://www.erc.ie/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/HSCL-report-2018.pdf (accessed on 3 January 2024).

The OECD review team was also informed of the general appreciation of the work of the HSCL Coordinators by teachers, principals and parents in DEIS schools. Furthermore, staff in non-DEIS schools often noted that HSCL Coordinators are a very desirable asset, in particular in those non-DEIS schools that host a sizable disadvantaged population. Schools especially appreciated how the Coordinators can take a neutral and supportive role towards families, by virtue of their independent position contrary to classroom teachers, principals and welfare officers. In particular, home visits allow them to fully grasp the challenges that students and families are facing, and report back to teachers so that they can understand struggles that these students may incur into. Moreover, their connection with other services allows them to support the families in addressing challenges beyond the education system, such as those linked to housing and healthcare. This holistic approach has been described as fundamental to reach the most disadvantaged families in DEIS schools.

The School Completion Programme

The SCP is highly regarded by various stakeholders, such as HSCL Coordinators, post-primary school principals and other members of local management committees. This appreciation is linked to various strengths of the programme, such as its flexibility in the supports it provides, which allows individual schools to adapt their offer, and its ability to provide immediate help to children during times of crisis (Smyth et al., 2015[11]). SCP was also appreciated as it allows for a provision of small sums or subsidies to schools, so that the needs of socio-economically disadvantaged children could be met. More recent evidence on the SCP will be released in an upcoming Economic and Social Research Institute report, due for publication in 2024.

Calls for greater supports provided through the SCP were raised in 2015, when stakeholders mentioned concerns related to damaging effects of funding cuts to the SCP over the past number of years, which led to a lack of long-term planning and uncertainty about the future of the programme (Smyth et al., 2015[11]). Since then, the overall funding increased from EUR 24.7 million in 2016, to approximately EUR 35 million in 2024 (Department of Education, 2024[21]).

Evidence-based literacy and numeracy programmes are at the core of the DEIS programme

DEIS is the first programme of its kind to provide literacy and numeracy programmes to the students involved in it. Data collected suggest that the uptake of literacy and numeracy programmes has been universal and successful among DEIS schools (Weir et al., 2017[27]). The DEIS programme targets early interventions in literacy and mathematics for students that are performing poorly. These interventions are Reading Recovery; First Steps; Maths Recovery; and Ready, Set, Go Maths. These four programmes are based on existing international research and practice, as to incorporate effective practices in the classroom (see more in Table 5.5 above). While the adoption of these programmes is long-standing, in recent years the evidence on some of these programmes is mixed. Some international studies demonstrate Reading Recovery's effectiveness in improving literacy among the lowest-attaining students, with long-term benefits that outweigh the initial costs by reducing future needs for special education and remedial programmes (D'Agostino and Harmey, 2016[40]; Pratt, Franklin and Kenward, 2018[41]). Children not only catch up with their peers but sustain and enhance their literacy achievements over time (Pratt, Franklin and Kenward, 2018[41]). However, other pieces of research have raised some questions on the soundness of the evidence behind the programme (Gilleece and Clerkin, 2024[34]). Critiques of the aforementioned literature have noted methodological limitations to some studies (Institute of Education Sciences, 2013[42]), as well as relatively weak evidence of any long-term positive impact (May et al., 2023[43]). Particularly, researchers have pointed out that specific evidence pertaining to the results of the Reading Recovery programme in schools in Ireland is lacking, compared to other countries (Gilleece and Clerkin, 2024[34]).

Research also showed that Math Recovery improves teachers' instructional strategies and students' numeracy outcomes, with evidence pointing to both immediate and sustained gains in student performance across various educational settings (Tabor, 2019[44]). Specifically, meaningful progress in numeracy skills was achieved in areas such as quantitative concepts, applied problems and arithmetic strategies (ibid.).

Research suggests that without DEIS funding, the implementation of these programmes would not have been possible (Weir et al., 2018[12]). The OECD review team was informed by teachers and principals that they appreciated the professionalisation of interventions provided through these programmes; a school that just recently joined the DEIS programme appreciated the possibility of taking part in these initiatives as they had previously applied to receive training in Reading and Maths Recovery but had not been selected.

A review by the Educational Research Centre noted that in the schools that experienced constant increases in reading and mathematics scores from 2005 onwards, principals attributed the improvement, among other things, to the use of specialised literacy and numeracy programmes, along with the setting of numeracy and literacy targets and the positive attitudes among students (Weir et al., 2017[27]).

A further confirmation of the value of these programmes for DEIS comes from the Chief Inspector's Report (Department of Education Inspectorate, 2022[13]). Between 2016 and 2020, planning and implementation of strategies for literacy and numeracy were overall positive. Across all DEIS evaluations, both of these elements were found to be good or very good in 76% of schools. The percentage of schools with very good planning and implementation in numeracy was almost the same as in literacy – 74% for planning and 72% for implementation. However, fewer schools were rated as very good in numeracy compared to literacy (ibid.). Moreover, the report notes that some aspects of numeracy do require attention, particularly learners' enjoyment of mathematics.

To support efforts towards the adoption of evidence-based practices, NEPS has developed various guidance documents for primary and post-primary schools, which aim to improve teachers' professional practice and to build capacity by providing information on evidence-based, response-to-intervention approaches and strategies in the area of literacy.

DEIS supports take a holistic approach that centre on student well-being

The DoE approach to supporting well-being and mental health is set out in the "Wellbeing Policy and Framework for Practice (2019-2025)" (also discussed in Chapter 2) that proposes a preventative, multi-component, whole-school approach to supporting well-being that includes both universal and targeted actions (Government of Ireland, 2019[45]). It focuses on four components:

- To provide children and young people with opportunities to be part of a school environment and culture that feels physically and psychologically safe, where they feel a sense of belonging and connectedness, where their voice is heard, and they feel supported;

- To provide children and young people with opportunities to experience supportive relationships within the school community;

- To give children and young people opportunities to experience success and a sense of achievement in their learning, and to develop and build core physical, social and emotional skills and competencies; and

- To ensure that approaches to supporting well-being and resilience are embedded in all of the school's policies and practices.

In line with this general approach, DEIS offers students support that is holistic in nature, and, as such, focuses not only on students' academic outcomes but on their physical and psychological well-being.

The School Meals Programme is one of the elements that fosters student well-being from several viewpoints and is well complemented by a number of initiatives that support students' psychological and socio-emotional development.

School Meals Programme

Literature has provided evidence on the importance of nutrition for academic performance (Glewwe, Jacoby and King, 2001[46]; Winicki and Jemison, 2003[47]). As hunger and food insecurity affect children from more disadvantaged backgrounds, the provision of meals at school can help strengthen equity within education systems (Gordanier et al., 2020[48]). Overall, the reasons for education authorities to provide school meals – whether at a cost or for free – are multiple: to improve academic outcomes of students, improve the nutrition of students by providing healthy food options, and support less advantaged families by reducing their food-related expenses, among others (OECD, 2023[49]).

As of September 2023, all DEIS primary schools are entitled to a hot meal, while DEIS Post-primary schools receive a cold meal daily (at the school's choice of either lunch or breakfast). However, DEIS Post-primary schools can provide hot school meals if they have the facilities to accommodate them and can leverage other funding to cover them.

In Ireland, the School Meals Programme is under the remit of the Department of Social Protection and following the expansion of the programme in recent years, some 2 600 schools and organisations, covering 443 000 children are now eligible for funding (Department of Education, 2024[21]). The objective of the programme is to provide regular, nutritious food to children to support them in taking full advantage of the education provided to them. The programme is an important component of policies to encourage school attendance and extra educational achievement (Department of Education, 2024[21]). Schools currently need to apply on an annual basis to the School Meals Programme. Entry to the Programme had been initially limited to DEIS schools in addition to schools identified as having a high concentration of disadvantage that would benefit from access, but now includes both DEIS and non-DEIS primary schools.

The School Meals Programme was introduced in 2019 as a small pilot of 30 schools. The Minister of Social Protection announced that from April 2024, 900 additional non-DEIS primary schools would qualify for the Programme, which will bring the total number of schools now eligible for hot meals to 2 000 (Department

of Social Protection, n.d.[50]). In addition, the Minister of Social Protection has announced that any remaining primary schools who have not yet joined the scheme can now express an interest to receive school meals.

Some schools – DEIS and non-DEIS – have initiatives in place to engage parents and the wider community

Research has shown that the involvement of parents or guardians and communities in the learning of their children plays a pivotal role in students' educational achievement and broader well-being (OECD, 2019[51]; Rutigliano and Quarshie, 2021[52]). Engaging local communities, parents, guardians and families is, therefore, important for schools who seek to create inclusive and equitable school environments (Cerna et al., 2021[53]). The participation and involvement of parents, guardians and the broader community can be promoted through school governance structures and initiatives and mechanisms that relate to fostering a positive school climate (OECD, 2023[49]).

Research has further shown that parental and family engagement can have a positive impact on students' educational outcomes (OECD, 2019[51]), as well as their overall well-being (Koshy, Smith and Brown, 2016[54]; Rutigliano and Quarshie, 2021[52]). Parental or guardian involvement can be particularly important for disadvantaged and marginalised students, or students who are otherwise at risk of not achieving their educational potential (OECD, 2019[51]).

In Ireland, there is recognition of the importance of family and community engagement with schools. In line with DEIS school planning requirements to promote partnership with parents, students in DEIS schools had a significantly higher mean score on the index of school policies for parental involvement in PISA 2018 (Gilleece et al., 2021[55]). This scale was based on parents' responses to items related to the availability in the school of parent education or family support programmes, the school's provision of information on helping with homework and school activities, the existence of an inviting atmosphere in the school for parents, effective communication by the school, and parental involvement in decision making. The mean score on this index in DEIS schools was about one-third of a standard deviation above the corresponding OECD average (ibid). In 2022, 14% of students in Ireland were in schools whose principal reported that during the previous academic year, at least half of all families discussed their child's progress with a teacher on their own initiative, compared to 23% in 2018 (OECD, 2023[6]). While the breakdown is not available yet among DEIS and non-DEIS schools, this decline indicates that some schools are more successful than others in engaging parents and families. However, COVID-19 restrictions – such as parents not being allowed in schools – may have played a role in this dynamic.

An example of the commitment to parent and community engagement is the Partnership Schools Ireland (PSI) initiative, which aims to improve outcomes for children by fostering partnerships between schools, families and communities (National Parents Council, 2022[56]). This initiative, a collaboration between the National Parents Council Primary and the Irish Primary Principals' Network, is partly funded by the DoE. Each participating school forms an Action Team for Partnerships (ATP), comprising 8-16 members, including the principal, staff, students, parents and community members. The ATP sets and works towards four annual goals: two academic, one behavioural and one focused on creating a climate of partnership. The ATP receives free training and on-going support, enabling them to create and implement a One Year Action Plan for Partnerships. The ATP collaborates with the school community to enhance the school's work, inform all stakeholders about their activities, monitor progress, overcome barriers, involve others in their initiatives, evaluate benefits and celebrate achievements.

Moreover, the Government published the Charter Bill in September 2019, which is currently awaiting an order for Committee Stage. This Bill aims to enhance engagement within the school community by mandating that all schools have a Charter (Government of Ireland, 2019[57]). This Charter, developed according to guidelines from the Minister, will involve feedback from students and parents on school plans, policies and activities, fostering a listening culture in schools.

In general, different strategies can be adopted to engage families and communities in the lives of schools. The OECD review team was informed of several different practices and strategies. In certain schools, staff members including principals, vice-principals and HSCL Coordinators regularly greeted children and their parents at the school entrance each day. This practice aimed to cultivate a friendly and inviting atmosphere while offering parents opportunities to discuss relevant matters or ask questions. Additionally, some schools organised activities designed to involve parents in their children's learning. For instance, one school introduced literacy and numeracy games to allow parents to participate in learning activities with their children and establish a broader connection with the school community. Another school offered adult classes and family sessions covering various topics such as family baking, art, cooking and woodwork, alongside well-being sessions designed to familiarise parents with the school's efforts in student well-being and mental health. This approach was particularly tailored to support a community facing challenges related to trauma and poverty, providing a secure environment for parents as well. Furthermore, the OECD review team was informed of initiatives like coffee mornings or breakfasts with parents as means to further foster engagement.

Looking at education more broadly, a significant majority of students attended primary schools where principals reported sharing resources (e.g. reading lists or websites) with parents (Gilleece and Nelis, 2023[31]). Over 85% of second-class students in both DEIS and non-DEIS schools had principals who utilised this approach to support parents in assisting with English reading at home. Similarly, high percentages of sixth-class students had principals reporting the use of resource sharing to aid parents in supporting their children's learning in mathematics, with percentages exceeding 75% across DEIS and non-DEIS schools. Between one-third and two-fifths of second-class students in both DEIS and non-DEIS schools had principals implementing programmes (e.g. multiple meetings with the same parents) to assist parents in supporting their child's English reading. For mathematics, these percentages ranged from 16% in DEIS Urban Band 2 schools to 39% in non-DEIS urban schools (Gilleece and Nelis, 2023[31]).

Initiatives to target local needs are developed and piloted by the DoE and local authorities

The Irish education system has a long-standing practice of developing pilots and projects to respond to local needs. These pilots allow the DoE to address local needs and verify the effectiveness of different interventions, evaluating the potential for mainstreaming certain programmes or initiatives. Indeed, research evidence in education can serve as a compass, directing stakeholders towards informed choices that maximise student outcomes and drive educational progress (OECD, 2023[58]).

These pilot projects span over different areas, and often aim at supporting disadvantage throughout the education system. This includes, for instance the City Connects pilot project – developed by the Boston College and operated by TESS – in North East Inner City (NEIC) (Dublin), which is implemented in ten DEIS Urban Band 1 primary schools (Walsh and Higgins, 2022[59]) (see Chapter 4 for more information). The aim of this evidence-based project is to provide a comprehensive system of student support to ensure that every student, regardless of background, receives the necessary services and resources to succeed academically and thrive personally. City Connects, guided by developmental psychology, recognises that if schools are to make significant inroads into equity of educational outcomes, they need a systematic approach to identify and meet the strengths and needs of every student across four domains: academic, social and emotional, family and health. City Connects' core practice culminates in a tailored support plan for every student. It seeks to ensure that the right supports are offered to the right student at the right time (Walsh and Higgins, 2022[59]). Another relevant example of the DoE work in the NEIC was the establishment of the Multi-disciplinary Team project (MDT). This project entailed the development of multi-disciplinary teams in ten primary schools in the area, which provide direct services to children, school staff and families within the schools. The NEIC MDT has three clusters, with one NEPS psychologist, one speech and language therapist and one occupational therapist in each team, and the schools are divided

into three corresponding cluster groups. A Health Service Executive (HSE)[11] psychologist works across the three clusters/ten schools.

Some of these targeted initiatives and pilot programmes concern specific student groups. For instance, in 2019, under the National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy, the DoE established a pilot programme operated by TESS to target attendance, participation, retention and school completion in specific Traveller and Roma communities: the Supporting Traveller and Roma (STAR) pilot project (Northside Partnership, n.d.[60]). The four STAR pilot projects were rolled out incrementally across Ireland in Cork, Galway (Tuam), Wexford and North Dublin. Fifty-five schools are involved in the pilot. The pilot teams are working together with parents, children and young people, schools, Traveller and Roma communities and service providers to remove barriers impacting on Traveller and Roma children's attendance, participation and retention in education. The pilot is co-funded by the DoE and the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) at a cost of approximately EUR 1.1 million per year, which involves the provision of additional HSCL Coordinators and the support of Education Welfare Officers in each pilot area, and the provision by DCEDIY of two community education workers at each pilot site. Other key stakeholders in the project include Tusla Education Support Service and Traveller and Roma representative organisations (Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, 2023[61]).

An independent evaluation of the STAR pilot project is currently nearing completion. This will fulfil the commitment in the Programme for Government to evaluate the project, and it will provide detailed and timely information that will feed into the development of the National Traveller and Roma Education Strategy. The evaluation, which commenced in May 2023 and is being carried out by the Centre for Effective Services, has involved engaging with a wide range of stakeholders and collecting a diverse set of data, including from over 30 focus groups with children and young people and their parents, interviews and workshops with those involved in the project, and school questionnaires.

Another targeted initiative that supports the needs of Traveller and Roma students was established using Dormant Accounts Funding (Department of Education, 2022[62]). Using this fund, the DoE funded ten new HSCL Coordinator posts in 14 non-DEIS post-primary schools with a high concentration of Traveller and Roma students. Their role is to work primarily with Traveller and Roma families and students to improve school attendance, participation, retention, progression and outcomes.

One of the most prominent examples of an initiative to respond to local needs is the Limerick Regeneration Framework Implementation Plan (Box 5.1). While the initiative spans far beyond the education sector, it includes a key educational component.

Box 5.1. The Limerick Regeneration Framework Implementation Plan

The Regeneration Programme

The Regeneration Programme was developed as the Irish government recognised the need to address the root causes and symptoms of social and economic exclusion in Limerick's regeneration areas. These areas face various challenges, such as high unemployment rates, poverty, lack of skills, early leaving from education and training, and issues related to physical and mental health (Limerick City Council, Office of Regeneration, 2013[63]).

The Limerick Regeneration Framework Implementation Plan aims to address these challenges through a comprehensive approach, focusing on physical, social and economic aspects (Limerick City Council, Office of Regeneration, 2013[63]). The plan includes measures such as removing infrastructural barriers, promoting community safety, constructing new housing, improving education and learning initiatives, enhancing health and well-being, and fostering economic engagement.

Strengthening communities is a priority, and the plan highlights the need for strategic and considered

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rebuilding, recognising existing strengths in each area. The revitalisation process aims for adaptable and flexible solutions, with on-going analysis and evaluation to assess the impact of various measures.

The plan also emphasises the importance of implementation and delivery of the plan, with a multi-level structure involving community participation, local partnerships, a national Program Delivery Group and a Limerick city-level partnership. The plan's success will be measured through specific performance indicators based on independent evaluation and monitoring of key data sources. The overall goal is to create a revitalised city with connected and vibrant neighbourhoods.

The role of education in the regeneration framework

Education is one of the key elements of the Regeneration Programme, and some expected outcomes and impacts that concern it are categorised under the "social regeneration" part of the framework (Limerick City and County Council, 2016[64]). Reflecting the broad scope of the social regeneration programme, outcomes sought include educational elements: improved educational attainment, reduced absenteeism at school and in other more intensive programmes of support, and the re-integration of adults and young people at risk of early school leaving into education and learning, among others.

While the impact of the social pillar of regeneration will require time before it can be fully established, the preliminary information on the programme points towards positive results (Limerick City and County Council, 2016[64]). For instance, 16 projects under Education & Learning reported improved educational attainment (children and young people at school or in alternative education provision) or qualification (adult learners); 14 projects reported improved school attendance and attendance at courses in further education and training; and 11 projects presented quantitative evidence of improved attainment and improved attendance/reduced absenteeism. Similarly, three initiatives reported improved school readiness among young children as they start primary school while five projects reported positive results in supporting young people to re-engage with education having been at risk of early leaving from education and training or school exclusion (Limerick City and County Council, 2016[64]).

According to a 2016 report, there had been a notable decrease in early leaving from education and training, and an enhancement in retention rates up to the Junior Certificate, currently standing at nearly 96%, whereas the nationwide average is 97% (Limerick City and County Council, 2016[64]). Similarly, retention rates for the Leaving Certificate have improved, reaching 89%, compared to the national average of 90%. The improvements observed in Limerick City align with national trends, but they also indicate a closing gap with state averages over recent years.

A noteworthy rise in the number of students took place from disadvantaged schools in the city, specifically DEIS schools, progressing to third-level education. While substantial differences persist, there was discernible evidence of narrowing the gap with non-DEIS schools in the city between 2010 and 2014 (Limerick City and County Council, 2016[64]). However, the gap increased in the data of the latest year available, 2015.

Challenges

In building on these strengths, Ireland will need to address a series of challenges related to the implementation of policies for promoting equity and inclusion at the level of schools.

Non-DEIS schools often do not have the means to supply additional school resources for their disadvantaged students

Extra-curricular activities: from breakfast to sport and music clubs

In Ireland, the provision of certain services, such as afternoon activities and clubs, or the establishment of homework clubs is under the responsibility of individual schools. Most primary and post-primary schools provide some form of extra-curricular activity, such as sports, drama and music (Department of Education, 2024[21]). Data from PISA 2018 also show that, according to principals' reports, the provision of extra-curricular activities is very similar between DEIS and non-DEIS schools. All students in both DEIS and non-DEIS schools reported to have access to extra-curricular sporting activities (Nelis et al., 2021[19]). Many schools in the DEIS scheme use their DEIS grant, and the Schools Meals Programme, to assist in the operation of homework clubs after school, other after-school activities and breakfast clubs aimed at groups of children deemed to be at most risk of educational disadvantage (Department of Education, 2024[21]).

Non-DEIS schools, in contrast, need to find the space in their budgets to organise such activities. The OECD review team was informed that non-DEIS schools, in particular those that might have fewer opportunities of raising funds through their communities, often do not have the budget to finance these initiatives. Some schools rely heavily on fundraising and philanthropy from the more advantaged families in their schools, and on parents and teachers volunteering their time to run these activities (more on volunteering in the next section).

There are several objectives that schools target through extra-curricular activities, homework clubs and breakfast clubs. On the one hand, these initiatives support parents and guardians as they provide a safe environment for students before and after their regular schooling day. On the other hand, these initiatives can improve students' performance, but also their attendance and punctuality, as they motivate students to go to school on time (Adolphus, Lawton and Dye, 2013[65]; Hoyland, Dye and Lawton, 2009[66]). In Northern Ireland (United Kingdom), for instance, evidence shows that the provision of breakfast clubs does not only support working parents, but can improve student performance, attendance and punctuality (Northern Ireland Government Services, 2021[67]). Similarly, evidence from England (United Kingdom) found that schools involved in a programme run by the DoE and a charity, Magic Breakfast[12], perceived important benefits from having a breakfast club (Graham, Puts and Beadle, 2017[68]). Indeed, evidence from a randomised controlled trial carried out by the Education Endowment Foundation (2016[69]) showed that breakfast clubs provided through the Magic Breakfast programme boosted the reading, writing and mathematics results of the second year of primary education students by the equivalent of two months' progress over the course of a year. The evaluators reported that the students' concentration and behaviour improved too. Their results suggested that for students in relatively disadvantaged schools attending the breakfast club, not just eating breakfast, leads to academic improvements (ibid.). This could be due to the nutritional benefits of the breakfast itself, or the social or educational benefits of the breakfast club environment. The provision of pre-school or after school activities can also improve student relationships and reduce victimisation (Defeyter, Graham and Russo, 2015[70]).

DEIS schools receive additional funding that can support the establishment of these initiatives, through the DEIS grant, the School Meals Programme or the School Completion Programme provision. Non-DEIS schools, as mentioned, need to have the space in their budgets to organise these activities. For instance, the OECD review team was informed that some schools have sufficient budget only to run a breakfast club for a limited number of weeks each year.

Non-teaching staff: educational psychologists, play therapists and more

The funding from the DEIS programme allows schools to hire specialised personnel to target specific needs that arise in their classrooms. During the OECD review visits, the OECD team saw various examples of schools hiring very specific profiles to fill an unmet need by the education system. For instance, some schools had hired play therapists to support their students dealing with anxiety and trauma. These therapists were integrated within the school staff and supported mainstream and special education teachers to address the needs of these students. The OECD review team was informed that some schools use the funding from the DEIS grant to set up an art and play therapy programme for students in specific educational levels.

While the flexibility of the DEIS grant allows schools to respond to very specific needs in its context, this practice has some limitations. The investment that schools make towards the hiring of psychologists, therapists or other staff, takes away from investments in other potential areas of need for the school. This becomes a limitation when this investment is made necessary by a lack of provision of certain services from the central administration, as discussed in more detail below.

Indeed, the fact that DEIS schools may have to use these funds to fill a gap in services that are on paper provided by the central authority – e.g. healthcare services, social services, etc. – but at time not in practice due to capacity issues, creates a challenge to the system due to the lack of similar opportunities for non-DEIS schools. While non-DEIS schools have a lower concentration of disadvantaged students, many do have a disadvantaged population. For instance, in PIRLS 2021, in non-DEIS primary schools, 19% of fifth-class students were in the lowest socio-economic quartile and 29% were in the highest (Delaney et al., 2023[7]). These students do not have access to the same supports as students with similar needs in DEIS schools. The disparity in the offer among schools, combined with the lack of support from national services create a challenge in the equality of the education system. This is one of the issues that raises concerns on whether disadvantaged students not attending DEIS schools are receiving enough support, compared to students in DEIS schools.

Many schools have to rely on teachers or parents volunteering their time to ensure the provision of certain services

As mentioned in the previous section, schools can run extra activities in good part thanks to the volunteering of teachers, parents and caregivers. This phenomenon seems pervasive of the education system, beyond the distinction between DEIS and non-DEIS schools. Indeed, while the OECD review team noted that non-DEIS schools relied on volunteering to run activities such as breakfast clubs, contrary to DEIS schools, most schools that the OECD review team visited had some form of volunteer-run activities.

Indeed, the OECD review team was informed that after-school activities such as homework clubs, sports, music classes and other hobby-related clubs, were generally run by teachers volunteering. The time that teachers dedicate to such activities is not remunerated but added on top of their formal working hours. Some principals flagged concerns for the additional strain that this poses on teachers and highlighted the risk of them incurring in burn outs or fatigue, due to the increasing workload.

Nevertheless, the OECD review team gained the impression that in most schools there is an expectation for teachers to volunteer a certain amount of time to run any of their school clubs or activities. Yet, interviews reported that many teachers put themselves forward to volunteer to support afterschool clubs without necessarily expecting remuneration.

Data from the Association of Secondary Teachers in Ireland (ASTI) from 2018, show that, on average, teachers spent over 20 hours per week on a range of non-teaching activities (ASTI, 2018[71]). They reported that a typical working week of a full-time teacher extended beyond 41 hours, on top of which teachers undertook additional duties. While most of these additional hours were spent on lesson planning, marking

homework and preparing for teaching, teachers reported spending an average of four hours per week on additional school activities. These included extra-curricular activities, such as sport clubs, game clubs, musicals and more. While these data are not directly comparable with TALIS 2018 (OECD, 2019[72]), as Ireland did not take part in the survey, on average across OECD countries with available data the number of hours teachers report having spent on engaging in extra-curricular activities is 1.7 hours, which shows a large difference compared to the four hours reported through ASTI data. This comparison should be taken with caution due to the different data sources, but it can provide an idea of the magnitude of the commitment of Irish teachers to support extra-curricular activities in their schools, compared to the average in other countries.

There are significant costs for families at the school level

Despite the right to free education being enshrined in the Irish constitution, some stakeholders feel that there is a financial burden on families linked to voluntary contributions, along with costs associated with classroom resources, books (from 2024/2025 only for Senior Cycle), extra-curricular activities and other fees. This section builds on the point developed in Chapter 3.

Voluntary contributions

Voluntary contributions (VC) are one of the forms that school fundraising activities can take. While the DoE has provided guidelines for schools to reduce the cost of education on parents, schools can request a contribution from parents towards the running of the school. Yet, while schools may request a voluntary contribution from parents, guidelines stress that it must be made expressly clear that there is no requirement to pay this cost (Department of Education, 2024[21]). According to the Admissions Act 2018 and Circular 32/2017, voluntary contributions may only be sought from parents, where it is made clear to parents that there is no compulsion to pay and that a child's place in the school or continued enrolment is not dependent on a willingness to make a contribution. The manner in which such VC are sought and collected is a matter for school management. However, their collection must not create a situation where parents or students could infer that the contributions are compulsory in nature. Under Section 64 of the Education Act (2018[73]), no fee can be charged for instruction in any subject of the school curriculum or for recreation or other activities where all students are expected to take part. The Charter Bill, introduced in 2019 and currently awaiting an order for Committee Stage (Government of Ireland, 2019[57]), will require schools to provide information to students and parents regarding VC that are sought and how they are spent.

As mentioned in Chapter 3, while official data regarding the level of voluntary contributions do not exist, other analyses reveal that, on average, these contributions amount to EUR 140 per child (Society of St. Vincent de Paul, 2023[74]). The range can span from EUR 30 to EUR 550 per child, providing some insight into the scope of VC and the variation in amounts requested by schools (ibid.). Indeed, 86% of survey respondents stated that their children's schools requested VC. Data from NAMER 21 found that sixth-class students in DEIS Urban Band 1 or DEIS Urban Band 2 schools had principals who were significantly less likely to indicate that the school requested VC from parents, compared to non-DEIS urban schools (Gilleece and Nelis, 2023[31]). While two-thirds of students in non-DEIS urban schools had principals who indicated that VC were requested, the corresponding values in DEIS Urban Band 1 and DEIS Urban Band 2 schools were about 22% and 30%, respectively (ibid.).

Furthermore, while DEIS schools generally report lower contribution rates, the importance of these contributions for funding resources and extra-curricular activities poses a risk of depriving disadvantaged students of essential services, perpetuating educational inequality.

The impact of VC on parents and students is of fundamental importance. Contrary to the notion that these contributions are optional, survey responses reveal that they are often perceived as mandatory, causing

stress to families (Society of St. Vincent de Paul, 2023[74]). The parents that were interviewed expressed concerns about potential stigmatisation or denial of access to activities for non-payment. For instance, parents reported the assignment of lockers or homework notebooks/diaries to their children being linked to the payment of VC. Similar information was also referred to the OECD review team during the parental interviews. The report (2023[74]) stresses that financial strain can lead to difficult choices between education and basic necessities, impacting food poverty, new debts and unpaid bills. Of the 1 477 survey respondents, more than 550 expressed a general difficulty in paying the VC or other charges; 142 noted an impact on their spending on groceries, family activities, or discretionary spending; and 96 reported it impacting their ability to pay, or causing the non-payment of bills.

Besides the impact on parents and families, a major concern revolves around schools' reliance on VC and other charges. Feedback from schools and parents indicates that funding from the DoE is insufficient for essential services like photocopying, assessment fees and classroom resources (Society of St. Vincent de Paul, 2023[74]). Although schools have the authority to impose fees for these resources, and some indeed do, the obligatory nature of these fees could potentially prevent families unable to afford them from accessing the services. The report also notes an increase in costs for resource-intensive subjects, exacerbated by uncertainties and rising energy prices. Extra-curricular activities depend on VC. Schools may have local arrangements in place for enabling disadvantaged students to participate (ibid.). Nonetheless, the reliance on school-raised funds may limit opportunities for disadvantaged communities, contributing to inequality in educational experiences. Extra-curricular activities are deemed crucial for developing social, emotional and leadership skills.

Transition Year

Transition Year (TY) can entail significant costs for families. TY is an optional one-year programme that is designed to act as a bridge between the Junior Cycle and the Leaving Certificate programmes. During TY, students find themselves immersed in an alternative learning environment where the focus is on more socio-cultural and experiential learning styles (Moynihan, 2015[75]). The TY mission, as set out in the current Transition Year Programme Guidelines, is "to promote the personal, social, educational and vocational development of pupils and to prepare them for their role as autonomous, participative, and responsible members of society" (Department of Education and Science, n.d.[76]). However, a new Transition Year Programme Statement is currently being finalised and the DoE is planning to introduce it in schools in the near future (Department of Education, 2024[77]). Overall, the TY programme brings high levels of satisfaction among teachers, parents/guardians and students, for how it supports learning and the all-round development and maturity of students (Department of Education, 2020[78]). TY is valued for the variety of learning experiences that it offers students and is seen as contributing in significant ways to the broad skill development of the student population (ibid.).

The teaching and learning methodologies adopted by each school through TY are varied, under the curriculum defined by individual schools. Schools have the freedom to decide, in accordance to the requirements set out in the Guidelines, what specific subjects to offer and what modules to develop depending on the skills of the teaching staff, the general resources of the school and the access it has to outside expertise in the community (Department of Education and Science, n.d.[76]). Opportunities and resources available in the local and national community, such as those offered by employers, further and higher education institutions, and other organisations, also inform the design of schools' TY programmes. Some of the activities that can be offered along with more traditional learning during TY are, for instance, work experience, foreign travels, field trips, guest speakers interventions, and social outreach projects. Activities such as foreign travels, while often offered by schools, are not necessarily a formal part of the TY programme and are at the discretion of each school.

Formally, the programme is available to all schools, but while most choose to offer it to students, not all students have the opportunity to access the additional year in practice (Clerkin, 2018[79]). TY represents a

substantial investment, in both financial and human terms for both schools and students. Previously, research found that small schools and schools that host a higher proportions of students from socio-economically disadvantaged were less likely to provide TY, often due to resource constraints or lack of student interest (Clerkin, 2013[80]; Jeffers, 2002[81]). However, there has been a significant expansion in the availability and uptake of TY over the last decade. Based on a survey completed by schools, the DoE advises that as of the 2023/24 school year, 99% of post-primary schools offered Transition Year, which indicates that the offer is present in almost every school. The total number of TY students in 2023/2024, according to forthcoming data from the DoE, was 58 701, corresponding to 80.8% of students enrolled in the final year of Junior Cycle in the 2022/23 school year.

The OECD review team was informed during school visits that TY is linked to significant expenses for families. While evidence is limited, a 2014 analysis by the Irish Second-Level Students' Union (ISSU) showed that the majority of surveyed students found that TY was an expensive year (ISSU, 2014[82]). According to the student responses, the contribution fund for Transition Year varied from school to school from EUR 150 to EUR 900 with the average being EUR 300 (ibid.). Recently, the Society of St. Vincent de Paul published a report on the expenses that families can face in the education system (Society of St. Vincent de Paul, 2023[74]). This report included a case study of six schools, which suggested that participation in TY can be costly. While these consultations may not be representative of the post-primary sector as a whole, they provide a general indication of the perception of families within the education system. In the case study, respondents reported paying fees ranging from EUR 320 to EUR 470, in addition to costs relating to trips abroad, which can cost upwards of EUR 500 per student (ibid.). Despite these high fees, money collected from the charges does not fully cover the expenses associated with running the programme. One DEIS school within the study reported that departmental funding for the programme amounted to only EUR 95 per student. This amount refers to the Transition Year Grant, which is a TY specific grant that is received by schools to support the costs of the programme, on top of the standard capitation grant (EUR 316 per student in 2023/24, which will increase to EUR 345 in 2024/25 (Financial Support Services Unit, 2023[83]; Financial Support Services Unit, 2024[84])) and funding relating to teachers' salaries and school building. Concerns were raised that a lack of funding can create a risk of exclusion for disadvantaged students or from schools in impoverished communities, resulting in a lack of equality in educational experience (ISSU, 2014[82]). Furthermore, the varied levels of funding can result in a wide-ranging quality of the TY experience for students, for instance in terms of guest speaking activities scheduled by the schools, or on whether they take part into national or international trips that their school organises. While more recent data would be needed to confirm that these challenges are still occurring in the system, the available data from 2014 showed that students emphasised the need for increased transparency in regard to TY expenses and contribution funds (ISSU, 2014[82]).

Given the prevailing social and economic conditions, financial constraints can be a challenge for some families, limiting discretionary income for unexpected TY expenses. For instance, students pointed out that financial difficulties could prevent certain students from participating in the optional trips that can be organised during TY (ISSU, 2014[82]). Yet, the majority of students interviewed in the survey who did not take part in TY, provided a reason other than costs as the main reason for not participating (ibid.).

The DoE is aware of the challenges related to access to and expenses for participation in TY. Indeed, the Minister for Education has committed to making TY universally available, so that every student in every school who wishes to participate in the programme can do so (Department of Education, 2023[85]). The DoE is currently working on how schools can be supported in the provision of the programme to all students wishing to take part in it, and this work includes examining the costs to families of participation in TY and other potential barriers to participation (ibid.).

Examination fees

Students who are taking or repeating the Junior Certificate, the Leaving Certificate or the Leaving Applied Certificate pay examination fees to sit the exams. The standard fee for a first time Leaving Certificate or Leaving Certificate Applied examination is EUR 116 (while repeat is EUR 301) and EUR 109 for the Junior Leaving Certificate (The Leaving Cert, 2020[86]). This expense can be significant for students and families and constitutes a potential barrier to their access to certifications. Other OECD countries do not charge examination fees or charge lower amounts. For instance, in Italy students are required to pay an examination tax of EUR 12 to take part in the assessment that takes place at the end of upper secondary education (Ministry of Education and Merit, 2019[87]). New Zealand, instead, removed National Certificate of Educational Achievement examination fees in 2019, to ensure students receive their qualification and are able to access their chosen learning or employment pathway (Ministry of Education, 2019[88]). Overall, data collected for the OECD School Resources Review suggests that it is very uncommon among OECD countries to allow public schools to charge tuition fees beyond pre-primary education or to charge fees for services related to teaching (OECD, 2017[89]).

An exception is granted if the students or their parents/guardians hold a medical card. While DEIS schools have a higher concentration of students from medical card holding families (Chapter 1), there is no specific exemption to examination fees for students in DEIS schools. In 2017, the most recent year for which data are available, approximately one third of students in non-DEIS schools came from medical card holding families, compared to 62% of students in DEIS schools (Weir and Kavanagh, 2018[90]).

The examination fees have not been charged since 2020, due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, recognising the challenge that this additional expense can entail for students and their families, the Government announced in 2023 a range of once-off measures to assist with increased cost of living pressures, includes the continuation of the waiving of the 2023 examination fees (State Examinations Commission, 2023[91]). This temporary waiving has also been extended to 2024 (Department of Public Expenditure, NDP Delivery and Reform, 2023[92]). However, this waiving is not yet confirmed for the following academic years. This may constitute a source of financial difficulties for families in the future, along with an inequity in the system between the students whose fees were waived, and ones that would have to pay it again in the future.

School uniforms and textbooks

In addition to voluntary contributions, expenses for TY and examination fees, other schooling costs, such as school uniforms and textbooks, can present significant challenges for many families, particularly disadvantaged ones. The DoE has requested school authorities to implement cost-effective measures to lower the expenses associated with uniforms (Department of Education and Skills, 2017[93]). These measures include allowing the purchase of uniform elements from various stores, using only "iron on" or "sew on" crests, favouring generic over branded items, providing a list of required items with estimated costs from value stores, and ensuring exclusive supply arrangements are tendered regularly (ibid.). Additionally, schools are advised to consult with parents every three years and annually review and communicate the costs of necessary items to the school community (ibid.). Nevertheless, school uniform costs for many families rose in 2023. Despite the DoE guidance, surveyed primary and post-primary school parents spent on uniforms an average of EUR 117 and EUR 204, respectively, attributing high expenses to the requirement of purchasing crested/branded uniforms (Barnardos, 2023[94]). The Back-to-School Clothing and Footwear Allowance is designed to alleviate the financial burden on families for school-related clothing and footwear costs (Department of Social Protection, 2024[95]). Eligibility hinges on receiving a qualifying social protection payment, participating in approved programmes, and meeting income and residency requirements, with payments ranging from EUR 160 for younger children to EUR 285 for older students. While the scheme supported over 130 000 families in 2023, some parents thought the threshold for entitlement should be lowered (Barnardos, 2023[94]; Department of Social Protection, 2024[95]).

Similarly, England (United Kingdom) has introduced statutory guidance to mitigate the financial impact of school uniforms on families (Department for Education, 2021[96]). It emphasises the importance of affordability, urging schools to limit branded items and to consider the overall cost to parents (ibid.). It also recommends transparency in uniform policies, competitive tendering for uniform contracts to ensure value for money, and the facilitation of second-hand uniform schemes (ibid.). Ireland is also discussing a new Bill with regulations mandating that schools develop uniform policies that are publicly accessible and clear on the requirements of each uniform element while ensuring affordability by allowing purchases from various retailers and limiting the use of branded items (Houses of the Oireachtas, 2022[97]).

In regard to textbooks, Ireland has recently extended the Free Schoolbooks Scheme to all children in primary and special schools (Department of Education, 2023[98]), and students up to Junior Cycle in post primary schools from the 2024/25 school year (Department of Finance, Department of Public Expenditure, NDP Delivery and Reform, 2024[99]). However, families with students in Senior Cycle in post-primary schools often face significant costs associated with textbooks. Recent non-representative surveys suggest that the average cost could have reached between EUR 218 and EUR 393 in 2023 (Barnardos, 2023[94]; Zurich, 2023[100]). Furthermore, despite Book Rental Schemes in many post-primary schools, less than half of the surveyed post-primary school parents had access, and many still contributed over EUR 100, indicating a significant financial burden on families (Barnardos, 2023[94]). Moreover, the surveyed parents spent an average of EUR 48 and EUR 147 on digital expenses in primary and post-primary schools, respectively (ibid.). To alleviate some of these costs, DEIS post-primary schools receive enhanced allocation for books (EUR 39 per capita compared to EUR 24 per capita in non-DEIS schools) (Department of Education and Skills, 2013[101]). Additionally, the DoE is encouraging schools to establish textbook rental schemes and provides guidance on how to develop them (Department of Education and Skills, 2012[102]).

Unmet need for assessments and therapies for children and young people

As mentioned in the context section of this chapter, student needs are more acute in DEIS schools. This includes an estimated quarter of the students having special educational needs, compared to one seventh in non-DEIS schools (Nelis et al., 2021[19]). Moreover, socio-economically disadvantaged students are one of the groups at increased risk of mental health disorders (Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, 2023[103]). Heightened needs in this area are also recognised by the "Young Ireland (2023-2028)" policy framework, which has identified groups of children and young people who may face additional challenges[13] and focuses particularly on three areas in which they are most at risk: child poverty and well-being, child and youth mental health and well-being, and disability services (Government of Ireland, 2023[104]).

While a focus on students' special educational needs is outside of the scope of this report, the heightened needs in DEIS schools make it relevant to flag shortcomings in the assessment of and provision of service for student needs within all schools, and DEIS schools in particular.

The role of the healthcare system

Healthcare services for children and young people in Ireland, including assessment and therapy services, are largely provided by the Health Service Executive (HSE), via three service streams: primary care teams (whose first-tier services include physiotherapy, occupational therapy, psychology, speech and language therapy, dietician services, social work and public health nursing), children's disability network teams (for children with disabilities), and child and adolescent mental health services (which provides assessment and treatment for young people experiencing mental health difficulties). There are currently large waiting lists to access these services, which compound difficulties that families experience in ensuring that their children receive the supports their need. Moreover, the OECD review team was informed that there

appears to be a lack of clarity among families and schools on how children can access the services they need.

Furthermore, a statutory right to an Assessment of Need[14] (AON) exists for children and young people with a disability. There are long waiting lists for access to the AON process (Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 2024[105]). The process is separate from the provision of health and social care services and is not a gateway to such services. Nor is an AON required to access education services.

While a diagnosis is not needed for students to receive support in mainstream schools, as they operate under the Continuum of Support and have a frontload allocation of special education teachers, it can be helpful for schools, teachers and families to clarify the needs of the children and decide how to best support them. In addition, a diagnosis is currently required for students to enrol in a special class/special school. Some schools reported to the OECD review team that they often support families in seeking assessments for their children's needs through the HSE, but anticipated significant delays, possibly spanning years. Some expressed concerns that students deemed urgently in need of assessment might complete primary school before receiving a diagnosis. This can lead families to refer to private assessments to bridge this gap, through an expensive process that not all families are able to afford. This challenge may place children with heightened needs and socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds at an additional disadvantage. These challenges in the timeliness of meeting the need for assessments and therapies for children and young people within the healthcare system create additional demand for supports provided through education. Indeed, families often turn to schools to receive support and services for their children, increasing the pressure on schools' capacity.

The Government and the HSE recognise the challenges linked to the current delays and have made an explicit commitment to the improvement of children's disability services (Health Service Executive, 2023[106]) and of other services for children through the implementation of the national policy for children and young people "Young Ireland (2023 – 2028)" (Government of Ireland, 2023[104]).

The role of the education system

NEPS is the psychological service of the DoE and provides educational psychological support to primary, post-primary and special schools. Each of the 227 psychologists that are employed by NEPS is assigned to a group of schools. The NEPS Model of Service supports schools to respond to the well-being, academic, social and emotional needs of all students, and includes a casework service for individual children and young people and a support and development service for school staff (Department of Education, 2024[107]).

The purpose of this model is to support schools to identify and respond to the needs of all students, including those with special educational needs, while also building school capacity to provide evidence-informed prevention and early intervention support as part of the Continuum of Support framework (discussed in the Context and features section above). The focus of the NEPS casework service is to use a consultative approach, to promote better understanding of the child or young person's strengths and needs, to suggest interventions that may be helpful to include in the Student Support Plan, and to assist schools to implement, monitor and review those interventions. This work is done in partnership with school staff, parents and the child or young person themselves (Department of Education, 2024[107]). The focus of NEPS support and development work is on building capacity, enhancing systems, policies and practices, to maximise a whole-school approach to creating environments which are inclusive, flexible and responsive to the needs of all children and young people (Department of Education, 2024[21]). This includes universal approaches to promote academic, social and emotional competencies and skills, as well as targeted interventions in response to identified need.

Despite the fact that NEPS provides enhanced service time allocation to DEIS schools, the OECD review team received feedback from several visited schools indicating that the allocation of time of NEPS

psychologists is not adequate to fully provide for a comprehensive educational psychological service. The OECD review team was informed that it may be difficult for schools, in certain instances, to best respond to the needs of a child without further professional support, including from NEPS.

The challenges in accessing support may reinforce families' reliance on private assessment services, and pose an additional burden on socio-economically disadvantaged households. Moreover, there are challenges for both the healthcare and the education system in recruiting qualified psychologists and other health and social care professionals including speech and language therapists and occupational therapists, as the country faces a shortage of personnel in these areas.

NEPS and other sections of the DoE are aware of this challenge and the need for provision of services within schools, to complement the services outside schools that are the responsibility of the HSE. For this reason, Budget 2023 provided for an additional 54 psychologists for NEPS (Department of Education, 2022[108]). In addition, the Government introduced a pilot programme that is running from 2023 to 2025, which has established counselling and mental health supports within the schools of a selected number of counties (Box 5.2). The counselling service provided under the pilot programme is not a substitute for services provided by HSE Primary Care Psychology and/or Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services, nor does it replace the role of the NEPS psychologist within a school. The pilot programme is an interim measure intended to supplement these services and meet current urgent needs for counselling and well-being support for primary school students. The pilot will run until 2025 and will be evaluated to gather valuable learning that will inform future policy and provision in this area.

Box 5.2. Counselling in Primary Schools Pilot 2023-2025

The goal of the project

The Counselling in Primary Schools Pilot 2023-25 project is an initiative aimed at providing counselling support to several primary school children, within a selected group of Irish counties. This programme has been designed to complement existing services in the area, and to ensure that children's mental health and well-being in primary school are addressed.

There are two strands to the pilot:

- **Strand 1** is the provision of one-to-one counselling to support small numbers of children in all primary schools in seven selected counties (Cavan, Laois, Leitrim, Longford, Mayo, Monaghan and Tipperary). The counselling service does not replace the services provided by the HSE Primary Care Psychology service or the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services, and children attending these services should continue to do so.
- **Strand 2** involves the establishment of education well-being/mental health teams to support schools in four cluster areas, and the introduction of education well-being practitioners into schools, under the direction and supervision of the NEPS.

The implementation of the project

Strand one of the pilot programme is intended to provide an opportunity for children to meet with qualified and experienced counsellors to work through any issues they may have.

The process is as follows:

- NEPS establishes county panels of pre-approved private counsellors to provide in-person one-to-one counselling to support primary school children in schools in the selected counties.
- Participating schools are allocated blocks of up to eight counselling sessions per child for a small number of children in the school. Sessions are book-ended by a pre- and post-session

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meeting with parents/guardians and school staff (in addition to the six sessions for the child). Participating schools are advised centrally of their specific allocation.

- Schools, in consultation with a NEPS psychologist, and guided by the Continuum of Support (described in the context session of this chapter), will identify and prioritise children who will access counselling support (subject to parental/legal guardian informed consent).
- Schools are responsible for commissioning counsellors from the panel to provide the counselling under the pilot.
- The allocated blocks of counselling under the pilot, if not used, may be carried over into a new school year.
- Schools will agree a number of hours per week with the counsellors, subject to their allocation. The counselling will be provided by the counsellor in the school during school hours.

Guidelines on the pilot have been provided to schools, stressing the importance of integrating recommended strategies into the child's school and home life to ensure on-going support.

Strand 2 of the pilot will see education well-being/mental health teams providing the following supports in selected schools:

- Strengthening whole school preventative approaches to promoting well-being and mental health;
- Providing psycho-educational support for parents and teachers; and
- Providing early intervention to groups of children or individual children with mild/emerging need, using low-level therapeutically-informed approaches.

Source: Department of Education (2023[109]), Department of Education Counselling in Primary Schools Pilot (CPS-P) 2023-2025, https://www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/276744/707880a1-9a8c-48b1-b27a-c2804864a4a4.pdf#page=null (accessed on 15 January 2023).

Schools do not often have the resources and capacity to engage families and local communities

Family engagement is an important factor in student development, both from an academic (OECD, 2019[51]; OECD, 2023[49]) and a well-being perspective (Koshy, Smith and Brown, 2016[54]; Rutigliano and Quarshie, 2021[52]). This can be particularly important for disadvantaged and marginalised students, or students who are otherwise at risk of not achieving their educational potential (OECD, 2019[51]). Moreover, evidence also indicates that engaging with families can bring new ideas and encourage schools to reflect on how to more effectively welcome diverse identities into their communities and develop more inclusive ways of working (Guthrie et al., 2019[110]; Rojas Fabris, 2016[111]; Calderón-Almendros et al., 2020[112]; OECD, 2022[113]). In addition, local communities can play an important role in educating young people and contributing to their overall well-being, including through supporting parents in creating safe and positive home environments (Cerna et al., 2021[53]; Smith et al., 2017[114]; OECD, 2023[49]). Alongside school-family partnerships, community-centred approaches have been recognised as effective tools in helping all students achieve their educational potential (Matthews and Menna, 2003[115]; OECD, 2019[51]; Rutigliano and Quarshie, 2021[52]).

In Ireland, giving voice and agency to children, young people and their parents 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 (Department of Education Inspectorate, 2022[13]). Not only do DEIS schools have planning requirements to promote partnerships with parents (The Inspectorate, 2015[116]), but the focus extends beyond the scope of DEIS. Indeed, the quality frameworks for inspections for primary,

post-primary and special schools state that "leaders should build and maintain relationships with parents, with other schools, and with the wider community" (Department of Education Inspectorate, 2022, p. 206[13]; Deparment of Education, 2022[117]).

Despite some notable initiatives in DEIS schools, there are still challenges for schools to engage successfully parents and families. The OECD review team gained the impression that various schools struggled with engaging all parents, and in particular parents of the most disadvantaged students. A recent report found that the levels of parent engagement are rated less favourably by principals in DEIS Urban schools (Gilleece and Nelis, 2023[31]). About 10% of students in DEIS Urban Band 1 schools and just over 25% of students in DEIS Urban Band 2 schools had principals who rated as high or very high parental support for student achievement. The corresponding value in non-DEIS urban schools was 84.2%. Parental involvement in school activities was regarded as very high or high by principals of just 1.8% of students in DEIS Urban Band 1 schools, principals of 12.3% of students in DEIS Urban Band 2 schools and principals of 48.8% of students in non-DEIS urban schools. In spite of the strong focus on partnership with parents in the DEIS Plan 2017, NAMER 2021 shows that this remains a challenging area for at least some DEIS schools (ibid.).

Lack of access to the HSCL Scheme

The OECD review team heard that one reason that limits the schools' ability to engage parents and communities more systematically in non-DEIS schools is their lack of access to the HSCL Scheme. While the data presented above show that non-DEIS schools generally have higher rates of engagement with parents, they often host a sizable population of socio-economically disadvantaged students. The OECD review team was informed that several schools struggled to find the time and resources to engage more extensively at-risk families.

HSCL Coordinators are a highly appreciated resource in schools and are considered an effective tool to engage families. Many of these schools could potentially benefit from the allocation of an HSCL Coordinator that would target this group of students. The schools, principals and teachers interviewed by the OECD review team referred that an HSCL Coordinator would be their main wish if their schools were to be attributed some of the DEIS resources. They were also open to the idea of a shared HSCL position among schools as a way to extend the reach of the Scheme, although this would pose limitations to the capacity of the Coordinator. This would be particularly relevant to rural schools, including DEIS Rural schools. While initially all DEIS primary schools, both urban and rural, were included in the HSCL Scheme, after the 2008 crisis and as part of the National Recovery Plan 2011-2014, DEIS Rural schools were excluded from the allocation. Specifically, the rural posts were withdrawn from schools with effect from August 2011 (Department of Education, 2024[21]). The rationale for the decision was on the basis that there was no evidence that additional teaching staff in smaller rural schools provided an additional impact. DEIS Rural schools performed on a par with non-DEIS urban schools in NAMER. Studies by the Educational Research Centre also reference the impact of higher parental engagement in rural schools as a reason for better educational outcomes (Weir, Errity and McAvinue, 2015[118]).

However, according to the Irish National Teacher Organisation, this change created a gap for DEIS Rural schools who have specific needs and would benefit from improved home-school links (Irish National Teacher Organisation, 2017[119]).

Infrastructural limitations

The OECD review team was informed that some schools have limitations linked to their material resources, when planning their family and community engagement strategies. Some of the gaps that were mentioned in the course of the interviews related, for instance, to school spaces. Principals and teachers mentioned the lack of a separate room where they could meet privately with parents, or in which they could organise some activities or workshops.

PISA 2018 showed that higher percentages of students in DEIS Post-primary schools, compared to non-DEIS post-primary schools, had principals who indicated that material resources hindered the school's capacity to provide teaching. Among the different resources, physical infrastructure was identified as a problem for similar percentages of students in DEIS (55%) and non-DEIS (41%) schools, both higher than the OECD average of 33% (Gilleece et al., 2021[55]). While these results do not concern specifically resources that can be leveraged to engage families, a shortage in teaching activities can suggest similar limitations for parental engagement activities.

Similar findings relate to the use of school infrastructure beyond the academic week. Data from NAMER 2021 show that principals in DEIS Urban Band 1 schools were less likely than principals in non-DEIS urban schools to report that buildings and facilities were available to the local community during weekends or out-of-term time (Gilleece and Nelis, 2023[31]). The Educational Research Centre suggested that it may be worth considering how the development of school-community links could be facilitated by the opening up of school buildings and facilities outside of school time.

Some support measures can limit the future opportunities of students

The OECD review team understands support measures to assist diverse students with their specific learning needs. The OECD review team noted that some of the support measures may actually be hindering their future educational and professional opportunities. The supports in question are the exemption to Irish language classes, and the use of reduced timetables – the latter in particular for Traveller and Roma students.

Exemption from the study of Irish

Irish is a mandatory subject in the curriculum, but exemptions may be granted to students under certain circumstances (Department of Education, 2024[21]).

Parents or guardians, as well as students over 18, can apply for exemptions through a process involving discussions with school officials. The decision to grant an exemption is made by the school principal, taking into account various factors outlined in the DoE circulars (Citizens Information, 2023[120]).

Eligibility criteria for the exemption can include circumstances such as:

- Moving from a different country without previous experience of learning the Irish language;
- Experiencing significant literacy difficulties which are an obstacle to learning across the curriculum; and
- Experiencing a high level of multiple and persistent needs that are a significant barrier to participation and engagement in learning and school life.

Special schools and classes may automatically exempt students, although there is an explicit expectation for these schools to provide opportunities for Irish language and cultural activities. The guidelines for the exemption stress that exempting a student from the study of Irish is an important decision that should be considered only in exceptional circumstance as it has implications for a student's future learning (Department of Education and Skills, 2020[121]).

Available data show that the proportion of students holding an exemption to the study of Irish rose quickly from the end of the 1990s until 2016 (Figure 5.2).

Recent unpublished figures show there has been an increase in the number of students with special educational needs securing exemptions, but a decline in the students from abroad securing exemptions. For example, the number of exemptions granted at post-primary level under the special educational needs categories has increased from 5 073 to 6 685 between 2018/19 and 2020/21, while the numbers from abroad are down from 5 465 to 4 412.

Figure 5.2. Proportion of students holding exemptions from the study of Irish relative to the post-primary student population 1999-2016
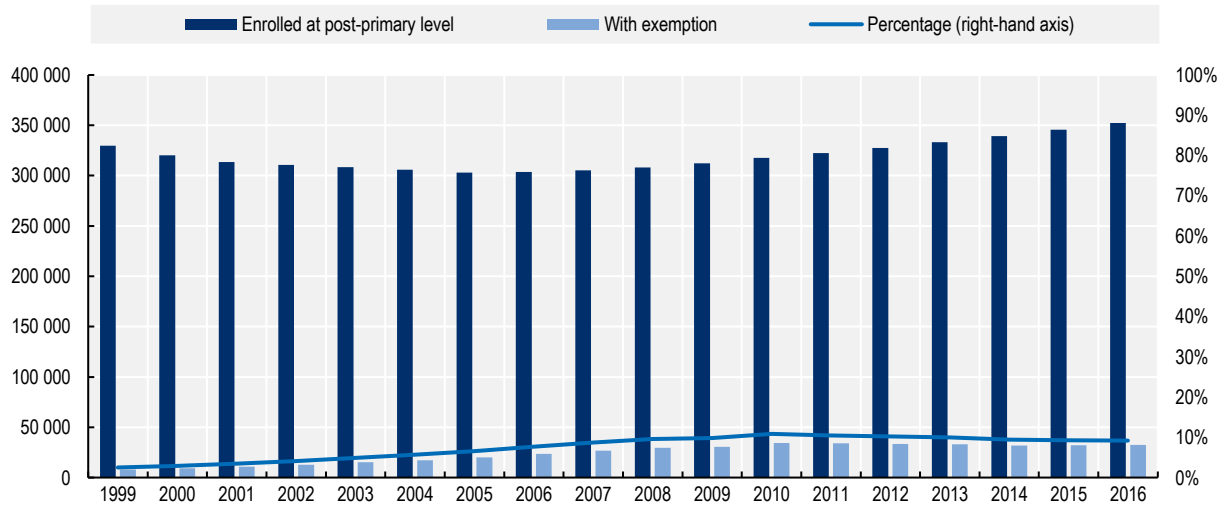
Source: Inspectorate (2018[122]), Review of policy and practice in relation to exemptions from the study of Irish, https://assets.gov.ie/30515/68a5644a015c4ee18fab3c9ed8a8ff0d.pdf (accessed on 15 February 2024).

StatLink 🔗 https://stat.link/l1c20k

The main limitation linked to the exemption from the study of the Irish relates to access to certain paths in higher education, and some professions later on. Indeed, some third-level courses require a student to have a certain grade in Irish at the Leaving Certificate examination. In some cases, if a student has been exempted from Irish at school, they may be exempted from the third-level requirement for a course. However, this is a decision matter for each higher education institution. Moreover, while some courses have an Irish requirement, there are generally some alternative paths to enter certain professional avenues or careers.

Some professions, too, have a requirement for Irish language. The most relevant case is that of primary education teachers: primary school teachers must be able to teach the Irish language and the range of primary school subjects through Irish (see more in Chapter 4) (The Teaching Council, n.d.[123]). Some roles in public service also have a similar requirement, in line with the government objective of having 20% of the public staff proficient in Irish by 2030 (Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media, 2022[124]).

Reduced School Day

A reduced school day is implemented when a child starts their school day later than other students, ends it earlier than others, does not learn specific subjects, or does not attend school for the full school week. The consequence of reducing the school day is to reduce the breadth of the curriculum and interrupt the continuity of tuition in some subjects (Houses of the Oireachtas, 2019[125]).

The OECD review team heard that the Irish Traveller Movement, along with other national and local non-governmental organisations (NGOs), lobbied for review of the unmonitored practice by schools, given its disproportionate impact on Traveller and Roma students, and leading to worsening outcomes in their education. In 2019, a Parliamentary Oireachtas Committee agreed to undertake hearings on the matter and issued an interim report (Houses of the Oireachtas, 2019[125]). This report refers that a survey of 101 parents with children on reduced school day showed the negative consequences of the implementation of

this policy (ibid.). These findings show that nearly two-thirds of these children attended school for less than three hours per day, with 12% receiving only one hour or less. In the survey, many parents expressed concerns not only about their children falling behind academically, but also about the emotional toll that this practice has on their children, including their experiencing of stress and shame. It was also reported that an additional challenge of this policy is due to the fact that some families face a financial burden when parents must give up work and seek social welfare allowances, to support their children on reduced school days (Houses of the Oireachtas, 2019[125]).

This report influenced the subsequent introduction of guidelines and monitoring. In September 2021, the DoE issued Reduced School Day Guidelines to all schools on the procedures to be followed when reduced school days are put in place for students. These Guidelines came into effect in January 2022. They are meant to ensure that the use of reduced school days is limited to only those circumstances where it is absolutely necessary and, that where such usage occurs, schools follow best practice with the interests of the student to the fore (Department of Education, 2023[126]). They also require the use of an RSD by a school to be notified to TESS on the first day of use and that any extension of use after a six-week period is renotified to TESS. When this concerns students with special educational needs, TESS informs the NCSE.

Yet, some concerns still remain within the system. The OECD review team was informed that Traveller and Roma groups are concerned that families are not well-informed on this practice. Indeed, interviewees raised concerns with the OECD review team that Traveller parents were not sufficiently aware of their rights, as these guides were issued to schools only. Moreover, a longstanding concern is linked to a misuse of the RSD. Indeed, the OECD review team was informed that Traveller and Roma organisations received several reports from parents about the inappropriate use of RSD. These reports indicate that reduced school days are being used outside of their original purpose, mainly as a behavioural management tool.

The DoE has recognised the need to support Traveller and Roma families in this area, and collaborated with Traveller and Roma organisations to disseminate information to parents and families. This included the development of a video for parents of Traveller and Roma children to inform them of their rights in respect to RSDs, such as their right to refuse an RSD, and contact details to get in touch with TESS welfare officers in case of need (Department of Education, 2023[127]). Since September 2023, the DoE publishes an overview of the frequency of the use of reduced school days in the system, also disaggregated by educational levels and student groups (students with special educational needs, and Traveller and Roma students) (Department of Education, 2023[126]). The data show that a total number of 1 044 first notification of students on a reduced school day during the 2022/23 school year, which represents 0.11% of total student population. Of these 1 044 students:

- 485 (46.5%) were from primary schools (94 DEIS, 259 non-DEIS);
- 460 (44.0%) from post-primary schools (82 DEIS, 129 non-DEIS); and
- 99 (9.5%) from special schools.

Of the total number of students, 684 (65.5%) had special educational needs (that is students in a special school, enrolled in a special class in mainstream school or attending a mainstream class but with significant/complex additional learning needs). Ninety were Traveller and Roma students. It should be noted that the data on Traveller and Roma students could be underestimated, as ethnicity is reported only on a voluntary basis. TESS has also confirmed that 342 second notifications (i.e. extensions of the reduced school day period) were received, of which 238 (69.6%) related to students with special educational needs. A total of 43 (12.6%) were Traveller and Roma students (where consent was given to indicate ethnicity).

This monitoring effort is an important step in determining the magnitude of the problem, and the data suggest that the DoE should maintain this analysis to ensure that the use of RSD for students with special educational needs and Traveller and Roma students in particular is appropriate. The data collection could help identify cases of misuse of the reduced day options, such as in the case of students with long-term

RSDs, rather than temporary ones. Moreover, then OECD review team was informed that the DoE is committed to investigating any claim of improper use of an RSD that is reported to them or Tusla.

Policy recommendations

Strengthen equity in the provision of additional resources across schools

Ensuring that access to additional resources (e.g. breakfast clubs, sports activities and music clubs) is equitable across different schools is key to strengthen learning opportunities for all students. This may entail ensuring that highly disadvantaged students can have the same access to resources, regardless of their enrolment in DEIS or non-DEIS schools (following the principle of horizontal equity, as defined in Chapter 3). Indeed, disparities in the capacity for provision of these resources across non-DEIS and DEIS schools can exacerbate inequalities among students from different socio-economic backgrounds. To address this challenge, the DoE should consider how the differences in funding across DEIS and non-DEIS schools may impact the provision of these resources and consider options to tackle this gap.

A first step would be to conduct a comprehensive review of the costs associated with breakfast clubs, sports activities and music clubs in schools that are able to offer them, to have an estimate of the expenses that institutions face to provide such services. This review should also encompass an examination of the financial burdens faced by families, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, in accessing these resources when offered by schools. Such an evaluation would need to account for variations in the offers among schools. High-cost extra-curricular activities may be offered in certain schools, while others may focus on core, less expensive activities. Moreover, some activities may be aimed at delivering more fundamental services, such as breakfast clubs. These should be considered on a different level, compared to more costly sport or recreational activities. While the ideal scenario would be to provide free access to a range of additional resources (e.g. breakfast clubs, sports activities) for all students, budgetary constraints may necessitate a more nuanced approach. Therefore, policy makers should prioritise promoting affordable access to these resources, particularly for families experiencing financial hardship. This could involve offering discounts for disadvantaged families or seeking partnerships with community organisations to offset costs and enhance accessibility.

To address the costs associated with the provision of these additional resources, policy makers should explore the feasibility of integrating these expenses into the capitation grant (for more information, refer to Chapter 3). By incorporating these costs into the capitation grant framework, the DoE could reduce financial barriers for schools and families, enriching opportunities for all students. In particular, these efforts would counter-balance the possible gap in support and resources for disadvantaged students across DEIS and non-DEIS schools. Alternatively, the DoE could consider incorporating funds to cover these resources in the context of a potential reform of the Bands. In such case, resources to cover for these additional supports could be allocated to a selected number of bands based on an assessment of different schools' needs.

In conclusion, by reviewing costs, integrating expenses into capitation grants, prioritising access for disadvantaged students, and promoting free or affordable access to additional resources, the DoE can provide students with equal opportunities to thrive and succeed academically and socially, regardless of their socio-economic background.

Review volunteering commitment of teachers and the impact on their well-being

The OECD review team was informed that most schools are able to organise extra-curricular activities exclusively thanks to the volunteering of teachers, parents and caregivers. This phenomenon seems pervasive of the education system, beyond the distinction between DEIS and non-DEIS schools. The

reliance on teachers by the schools may become a challenge when it impacts teacher well-being, by increasing their workload and the unpaid time they spend on these activities.

As discussed in Chapter 4, Ireland is facing a shortage of teachers, which is impacting the whole education system. As recommended in Chapter 4, analysing the causes for attrition would be an important step to identify the drivers of this phenomenon. Within these efforts to analyse the causes of the shortage, the DoE should include the amount and requests for volunteering commitments and their magnitude. Information on this practice could clarify its role on the well-being and satisfaction of teachers, if any.

Strengthen the coordination of educational services with the health and therapy service provision to increase support for schools and families in meeting students' needs

The provision of timely and appropriate services to support students' needs is fundamental. The institutional supports for students with special educational needs or with mental health needs are under pressure in Ireland, facing challenges from both the side of the DoE and the Department of Health. Better planning is needed so that there are adequate numbers of personnel available to provide support within both sectors, and ensure that existing resources coordinate effectively in delivering support to the students. It would be important, for all of the relevant governmental departments – Health, Education and Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth – to collectively deliver on national policy, including on the "Young Ireland 2023-2028" policy framework. Aligning adequate supports and resources for children with additional needs, while simultaneously working to improve the system of support so that barriers to access are removed, is fundamental.

This is particularly important for disadvantaged students, as their families may not be able to afford private assessment or therapy services. Moreover, it would help relieve pressure from schools, as they invest a significant amount of time to help families navigate the support system, for instance, by helping them fill out the forms.

As discussed in Chapter 2, Ireland should strengthen the coordination and integration of services across departments to better support students at risk of educational disadvantage. For this specific issue, this entails ensuring that the services of the relevant Departments – Education, Health, and Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth – are aligned, coordinated and complement each other. This would require stronger co-operation between departments. Ireland has begun work in this area following recommendations from the Sharing the Vision national mental health policy. This policy aims at enhancing the provision of mental health services and supports across a continuum from mental health promotion to special mental health service delivery during the period 2020-2030. Recommendation 10 in the policy states that "a protocol should be developed between the Department of Education and HSE on the liaison process that should be in place between primary/post-primary schools, mental health services and supports such as NEPS, general practitioners, primary care services and specialist mental health services. This is needed to facilitate referral pathways to local services and signposting to such services, as necessary (Department of Education, 2024, p. 31[128])." A Working Group was established to follow the recommendation, and improve liaison processes and information sharing between schools and mental health services. This work was further strengthened by the development of the "Young Ireland 2023-2028" policy framework, which explicitly recognised inter-agency coordination as an issue in the services for children and young people and an area to be strengthened (Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 2024[105]).

A whole-of-government approach to children's needs and health would be key in developing this collaboration and could help both services avoid competing for resources and personnel. Clear pathways to services that are well resourced can also ensure that no child falls through the cracks, and that their learning and well-being needs are prioritised. Social services should also be involved in these collaborative efforts, as they can provide an additional, fundamental angle on student well-being, the challenges and hardship they may be facing, while also supporting parents and families through these processes. An

example of a comprehensive and holistic policy approach to child well-being, including mental health needs, is that of the United Kingdom's Every Child Matters policy (Box 5.3). This policy aligns with Ireland's "Young Ireland 2023-2028" policy framework, as they share similar outcomes.

Box 5.3. Every Child Matters policy in the United Kingdom

An example of a long-standing, holistic policy that focuses strongly on child well-being is the Every Child Matters policy, which emerged as a result of the Children Act 2004. The core principle behind this policy is to ensure that every child in the country has the opportunity to achieve their full potential and lead a healthy, safe and fulfilling life. The policy is based on five key outcomes, which collectively form the foundation for supporting the well-being of children:

- Being healthy: focuses on promoting physical and mental well-being. It aims to ensure that children have access to necessary healthcare, a healthy diet, and opportunities for physical activity. Mental health and emotional well-being are also emphasised to foster resilience and coping skills.

- Staying safe: involves safeguarding children from harm and ensuring they grow up in environments free from abuse, neglect and exploitation. The policy emphasises the importance of creating safe spaces both at home and in the community.

- Enjoying and achieving: underscores the significance of providing educational opportunities that allow children to enjoy learning and achieve their full potential. It encompasses academic success, personal development and engagement in extra-curricular activities.

- Making a positive contribution: encouraging children to make positive contributions to their communities is a key aspect of the policy. This involves fostering a sense of responsibility, empathy, and active participation in social and civic life.

- Achieving economic well-being: focuses on equipping children with the skills and knowledge needed for future employment. It also addresses issues related to poverty and aims to break the cycle of disadvantage.

A key element of this Act, whose scope is broader than children's mental health and learning needs, is that it provided boundaries to the different services and help to local authorities, schools and other entities involved in the care of children to better regulate official intervention in the interests of children.

Source: HM Treasury (2003[129]), Every child matters: Presented to Parliament by the Chief Secretary to the Treasury by Command of Her Majesty, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7c95a4e5274a0bb7cb806d/5860.pdf (accessed on 13 February 2024).

The Every Child Matters policy is also a framework that guides the work of professionals and organisations involved in the welfare of children, including education, healthcare, social services and law enforcement. It promotes multi-agency collaboration and coordination to address the diverse needs of children comprehensively, ensuring that no child falls through the gaps in support and services. This example could support Ireland in strengthening the coordination of the relevant departments when providing educational and therapy services to children and young people.

Review additional costs of education to families to improve the accessibility of provisions

While education in Ireland is formally universally free, families can face significant costs as their children progress through education. Voluntary contributions, fees to access TY, examination fees, book costs, are all expenses that families may be facing to ensure their children stay in education. Official data on the

overall amounts that families spend on these are not available at the national level. It would be important to obtain such information to understand the impact of this phenomenon on schools and potentially also families. This would allow verifying whether significant disparities exist among schools, for instance, if participation in these provisions in non-DEIS schools entails greater expenses for families, and also to monitor eventual school-level exemptions for disadvantaged students. Thus, a thorough review should be developed on all these additional payments that families face to monitor the effective costs of education and the inequalities among schools. The DoE should also consider specific steps in regard to the different costs.

Voluntary contributions

An additional element that should be reviewed, and addressed by the DoE, is whether the provision of voluntary contributions is linked to services that the government would consider essential to a student's education. It could happen, for instance, that the provision of homework notebooks is tied to the payment of a voluntary contribution. Such mechanism is incompatible with the – in theory – voluntary nature of these contributions, and schools should not be allowed to enact them.

The DoE should also take into consideration that schools often establish specific amounts they expect for voluntary contributions, which contradicts the principle of voluntariness associated with such contributions. The DoE could evaluate the possibility of not allowing schools to set specific amounts, as a measure to alleviate the burden on families that, as reported above, feel forced to pay significant amounts that impact their household finances. Moreover, it should be investigated whether schools treat students that do or do not pay these contributions differently.

The request of "payment of fees or contributions (however described) to the school" cannot be considered by schools when deciding on student admission, according to the Education (Admission to Schools) Act 2018 (2018[73]). As this regulation focuses only on student admission, the DoE may want to consider further financial and monitoring measures to guarantee free basic education for all.

The DoE should also account for the role that these contributions play in the funding of schools. It would be key to analyse data on how the contributions are used, what range of expenses they cover, and if they are necessary for the schools to provide what the DoE would consider the necessary standard of education provision. If such an analysis were to reveal that schools do rely on these funds for their daily activities and to be able to provide a high-quality education, the DoE should consider if the capitation grant is sufficient, in particular concerning non-DEIS schools (see Chapter 3 for more information).

Transition Year

The DoE is currently conducting a review of access to and provision of Transition Year, which will include consideration of associated costs for both schools and students. As discussed previously, there are neither official data on the costs for families to enrol their children into TY, nor guidelines on how much schools should charge for it. While participation in TY is optional, this does not apply to all Irish schools, as some may make this year mandatory, although rarely so. The DoE review is part of the Department's work to implement the commitment that in the future, TY will be available to every student who wished to partake in it.

The DoE may consider two steps in regard to TY: first, it would need to complete the aforementioned review, with particular attention to the costs of the programme for both families and schools. The DoE could also consider developing guidelines to indicate to schools some ranges for the fees they charge for TY, based on the different activities they decide to provide. This exercise would have to take into account the autonomy that schools have in designing their TY programmes and provide different options to schools based on their capacity. While these guidelines would be advisory in nature, they could, for instance, suggest ranges for the costs or identify caps in the costs of different activities that can be offered as part

of TY. Such guidelines would acknowledge that costs may vary in different geographical areas or depending on the size of schools or classes. They could also provide some clarity for families on the potential expenses entailed in TY.

Second, depending on the results, the DoE should examine how to support disadvantaged students that may want to enrol in TY. These supports could be both financial and non-financial, as well as provided at the level of the individual student or school. As this programme can help students develop socially, academically, and in choosing their focus for the Leaving Certificate (Established or Applied), being able to participate in it can be beneficial for socio-economically disadvantaged students. However, if the costs for taking TY are too high, students may miss out on an important developmental opportunity. Centralised financial support for disadvantage students to undertake TY in all schools, both DEIS and non-DEIS, could further foster equity within the Irish education system.

Examination fees

Lastly, the DoE should re-evaluate examination fees. According to the governmental response to the pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis, the examination fees have been waived since 2020, up to the 2023/24 academic year. The DoE should take stock of the initiative and evaluate whether this policy has had any significant negative financial impacts on the education system, considering the benefits it brought. If this has not occurred and the policy appears to be financially sustainable, the DoE should consider removing such fees completely, to strengthen the system's free education principle.

New Zealand made a similar choice in 2019. The Government recognised that the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) fees created barriers to access for many New Zealanders working towards the qualification. Thus, Budget 2019 provided funding to cover the cost of NCEA assessment fees for all students, with the goal of supporting equity of access to NCEA qualifications and increases residual incomes for low-income families (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2019[130]; New Zealand Government, 2019[131]).

Promote promising models and examples of engagement and collaboration with parents, families and communities

Research has shown that the involvement of parents or guardians and communities in the learning of their children plays a pivotal role in students' educational achievement and broader well-being (OECD, 2019[51]; Rutigliano and Quarshie, 2021[52]). Engaging local communities, parents or guardians and families is, therefore, important for schools who seek to create inclusive and equitable school environments (Cerna et al., 2021[53]). As discussed in this chapter, some schools have flagged that a lack of appropriate resources impede them from effectively engaging with families and communities. This challenge tends to affect more often non-DEIS schools, as the DEIS programmes includes specialised resources to facilitate this process, such as the HSCL Coordinator, the SCP Coordinator and SCP Project Workers.

Promote and facilitate the sharing of successful community and parental engagement practices among schools

One way in which education systems can support schools in this respect is by providing schools with guidance on how to involve parents and guardians from all backgrounds in the school community (Guthrie et al., 2019[110]; Santiago et al., 2017[132]). The DoE could incentivise the sharing of practices, leveraging the experience that several schools have successfully developed. For instance, the DoE could take advantage of the experience of specific schools that were particularly successful in tackling student absenteeism or disengagement, or that designed innovative initiatives to engage parents and families. The DoE could rely on the support of the Inspectorate both to identify good practices in schools, and to circulate information and examples that can be of help to other schools (as suggested also in Chapter 2). The

Inspectorate would be best placed to identify virtuous examples through their evaluations, and, at the same time, they could relay these examples to schools that they identify as needing support in the area of parental and community engagement.

Support can also be provided in relation to the engagement for specific groups of students (OECD, 2023[49]). Recommendations on steps schools can take to engage with refugee parents and families are, for example, included as part of guidance published by the Department of Education in New South Wales, Australia, on how schools can support students from refugee backgrounds (Cerna, 2019[133]; New South Wales Department of Education, 2016[134]). Similarly, a guide for "working with Roma Families towards achieving the success of their children at school", was developed in a transnational project across Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania and Spain, with the support of the European Commission's Lifelong Learning Programme (Arbex et al., 2013[135]) (see Box 5.4).

Box 5.4. International expertise: a guide for working with Roma families towards achieving the success of their children in school

This guide represents a comprehensive methodological tool developed from the collective expertise of education professionals engaged in working with the Roma population across Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania and Spain. Drawing from the experiences gleaned in each participating country, the guide synthesises insights from national seminars and reports to formulate effective intervention models.

The primary objective of this guide is to furnish practitioners with a flexible framework for engaging with various types of Roma families, especially those grappling with challenges related to school dropout rates and academic achievement among their children. While the guide does not adhere strictly to any single theoretical model, it draws upon diverse theoretical principles to inform its methodology.

The guide's approach

At its core, the guide underscores the importance of conducting individual assessments for each participating family and devising tailored intervention plans, that they call Family Work Plans (FWPs). It also emphasises on-going evaluation to gauge the efficacy of implemented strategies.

By delineating a spectrum of strategies, methods, and actions, the guide empowers practitioners to make informed decisions aligned with the unique circumstances of each family and the context of intervention. While the examples provided aim to illustrate common scenarios, they do not contend to encompass all potential situations encountered in practice.

The guide also offers insights into the main factors influencing the academic success of Roma students across the participating countries. It explores theoretical frameworks that underpin interventions aimed at supporting Roma families within the educational landscape.

Key steps to engage Roma families

A pivotal component of the guide is its delineation of a methodological tool comprising seven key steps for intervention with Roma families in school settings:

1. Analysing the environment and dissemination of the programme.
2. Attracting and recruiting families and partners.
3. Approaching families and creating a bond with them.
4. Conducting initial assessments.
5. Designing an FWP and creating a work alliance.
6. Implementing the actions foreseen in the FWP.

> 7. Conducting follow-up and assessment of the planned intervention.
>
> In conclusion, the guide serves as a comprehensive resource for education professionals seeking to enhance the educational outcomes of Roma children and adolescents. By following its methodologies and recommendations, practitioners can foster more inclusive and supportive educational environments for Roma families across diverse socio-cultural contexts.
>
> Source: Arbex et al. (2013[135]), Guide for working with Roma families towards achieving the success of their children in school: A transnational methodological proposal for professionals,
> https://romafamiliesgetinvolved.files.wordpress.com/2013/03/guide_roma_families_en.pdf (accessed on 14 February 2024).

Consider the expansion of the HSCL Scheme to schools with particular needs

HSCL Coordinators are considered a key component of the DEIS programme, and more specifically of the schools' efforts to engage parents, families and communities. Having a dedicated staff member who can focus on connecting the school with families is a fundamental resource for the schools that were seeing challenges with parental engagement, and student performance, attendance and well-being.

The OECD review team was informed that both DEIS and non-DEIS schools generally appreciate the programme. In particular, non-DEIS schools stressed the difference in establishing a rapport with families that having an HSCL Coordinator, among the various DEIS resources and supports, could make for their schools. HSCL Coordinators appear to be particularly sought after by non-DEIS schools and a potential solution for needs in the area of family engagement and support.

The DoE could consider a partial expansion of the Scheme, or its general mainstreaming, depending on the financial sustainability of this reform. A partial expansion of the Scheme could focus on schools that have a particular need for this support, and should be developed in line with an eventual decision from the DoE to extend the supports to all students defined as disadvantaged, as discussed in Chapter 3. This could entail, for instance, providing an HSCL Coordinator to schools that host a sizable, disadvantaged population, even if they did not qualify for the DEIS programme. The expansion could also consider DEIS Rural schools that were excluded from the programme since 2011. The DoE could also consider specific indicators to identify schools most at need for this specific support: high levels of absenteeism in certain schools, low academic performance and more. As discussed in Chapter 4, a potential extension of the HSCL Scheme could be facilitated by relaxing the qualification requirements for HSCL Coordinators, given the current shortage of teachers in the system.

Provide mediators for Traveller and Roma students and families

Cultural mediation is a well-known concept and widely used strategy among a variety of institutions and organisations in OECD countries (OECD, 2022[113]; OECD, 2023[49]). Cultural mediators can support schools and teachers to reach out to specific groups of students and their families, facilitate successful communication and promote positive relationships. For instance, the Department of Education of the state of Colorado (United States) uses cultural mediators to connect with parents and families, including within its Head Start programmes, which seek to promote the school readiness of infants, toddlers and preschool-aged children from socio-economically disadvantaged families (ibid.).

A group that may particularly benefit from cultural mediators in Ireland are Traveller and Roma students. In the European Union (EU), the use of cultural mediators with a Roma background is considered to be one of the most effective practices for bridging potential gaps and fostering connections between Roma communities and public institutions (OECD, 2022[113]; Rutigliano, 2020[136]). Cultural mediators with a Roma background are employed in the education systems of several European countries to build trust and sustained relationships between schools and Roma families, and to support the learning of Roma students.

Czechia, Finland, Romania and Spain were among the first countries to use members of the Roma communities to improve Roma children's chances of succeeding at school (Council of Europe, 2017[137]). Similarly, Nordic countries have included the support of cultural mediators in their policies to support Roma students and their families (Rutigliano, 2020[136]; Helakorpi, Lappalainen and Sahlström, 2019[138]). Cultural mediators have proven successful in improving the well-being and academic performance of Roma students as well as promoting the inclusion of the community as a whole (OECD, 2022[113]; Rutigliano, 2020[136]).

Cultural mediators could be considered as partners to HSCL Coordinators in situations of particular needs, or to schools that do not have an HSCL Coordinator to foster their engagement with Traveller and Roma families. This would be in line with the practices that are being developed, for instance, under the STAR projects, which employ members of the Traveller and Roma community to facilitate engagement in the initiatives. The same principle can be adopted for schools with a high concentration of students with an immigrant background, who may need specialised personnel to engage effectively their families and support them in their educational experiences.

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Notes

[1] PISA measures reading, mathematics and science performance of 15-year-olds.

[2] The survey involved 319 respondents among HSCL Coordinators in primary and post-primary schools in Ireland. Focusing on HSCL Coordinators, the survey concerns almost exclusively DEIS schools.

[3] These actions are part of the STAR pilot, currently in its 5th year and being evaluated by the DoE.

[4] EWS is the statutory arm of TESS charged with ensuring that all children aged 6 to 16 are in school and through a welfare approach supports parents to ensure their children attend school. Where parents fail to ensure their child attends school, as a last resort, a parent may be prosecuted under the Education (Welfare) Act, 2000.

[5] The PISA items do not address the complexity of special educational needs or the supports offered to students with these needs.

[6] Economic, Social and Cultural Status (ESCS) index is a composite score based on highest parental occupation, parental education, and home possessions. It measures an individual's social and economic status relative to their peers in society and can be compared within and between countries and across PISA cycles.

[7] DEIS Post-primary schools may also receive a hot meal daily, rather than a cold one, depending on the decision of the school management.

⁸ The Free Education Scheme is established under the Free Education Act of 1967, and only schools that do not charge fees are included under its umbrella.

⁹ Children with special educational needs can have a range of identified needs in areas such as literacy, numeracy, language, social interaction, emotional development and self-regulation, among other needs.

¹⁰ In 2017, the Educational Research Centre surveyed HSCL Coordinators as part of the formal evaluation of the DEIS programme. 413 coordinators received the survey, and 77% of them returned a compiled questionnaire. Among other questions, the coordinators were asked to give an indication of the extent to which the HSCL Scheme had impacted on the involvement of parents in the educational lives of their children, if at all (Weir, 2018[5]).

¹¹ The HSE is the publicly funded healthcare system in Ireland, responsible for the provision of health and personal social services.

¹² 106 English primary schools with higher-than-average numbers of disadvantaged students took part in the trial, which was delivered to 8 600 students by the charity Magic Breakfast.

¹³ Groups who may face additional challenges include those with a disability, with mental health challenges, living in or at risk of poverty including homelessness, who are members of the Traveller or Roma communities, who are members of the LGBTI+ community, who have suffered abuse or neglect, seeking international protection, from minority ethnic backgrounds, migrant children and young people, living in a single parent household, living in care or aftercare, who are young carers, living in a household with substance misuse, or with a family member in prison.

¹⁴ The Assessment of Need (AON) is a statutory process under the Disability Act (2005) whereby the HSE reports on the health needs, and the education needs of a child/young person. All children/young people born on or after 1st June 2002 are eligible to apply to the HSE for an AON under the Disability Act (2005). The AON process is provided for under the Disability Act 2005 and is under the remit and responsibility of the HSE. The AON process commences when the parent/guardian makes an application for their child to the HSE. Assessment Officers working under the remit of the HSE are charged with arranging an AON which culminates in the provision of an Assessment of Need Report and Service Statement for those who apply under the Disability Act. The Assessment Officer coordinates and completes the Assessment Report and makes a determination as to whether or not a child or young person meets the definition of disability detailed in the Act.

6 Monitoring and evaluation to address educational disadvantage

This chapter is about monitoring and evaluating the Irish education system, particularly the DEIS programme. It analyses how outcomes are monitored and evaluated at the system and school levels. Ireland has developed a strong expertise in monitoring and evaluation in regard to the DEIS programme. Moreover, the system emphasises the role of self-evaluation, and the Inspectorate serves a vital role in school evaluation more generally. However, challenges remain concerning the limited use of granular and combined administrative data, the absence of a control group and causal implications in DEIS evaluations, and insufficient capacity for data-informed improvement planning in DEIS schools. The chapter provides recommendations to overcome these challenges, and strengthen the monitoring and evaluation efforts of the DEIS programme and the education system more broadly.

Contextual background

Monitoring and evaluation of outcomes at the system level

Monitoring and evaluation are essential to assess progress in improving education outcomes. Monitoring refers to the systematic collection of data to assess the progress and achievement of policy objectives against set targets, and to identify and lift implementation bottlenecks (OECD, 2024[1]). Evaluation refers to judgements on the effectiveness of schools, school systems, policies and programmes (OECD, 2013[2]). Monitoring and evaluation are crucial in providing feedback to inform improvements across the education system and identifying necessary school support measures (OECD, 2023[3]). Without relevant monitoring of data, policy makers might evaluate policies and practices according to the imperfect information they have available. This might misdirect them or, in the case of the absence of data, may mean that they are unaware of challenges that need action (ibid.).

Monitoring and evaluation efforts are often summarised in strategic documents. Ireland's main strategic document that monitors education inputs, processes and outcomes is the Statement of Strategy, which runs from 2023 to 2025 (Department of Education, 2023[4]). It outlines the vision, mission, values, goals and actions of the Department of Education (DoE) for the three years (Chapter 2). It reflects the challenges and opportunities in the education sector, such as the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the arrival of Ukrainian students, the need for digital and climate action, the enrolment projections and trends, a growing recognition of the importance of the personal well-being of children and young people, and international and cross-governmental commitments and obligations. In terms of monitoring and evaluation, the Statement sets out four strategic goals and several strategic actions for each goal. The goals are to:

- Enable the provision of high-quality education and improve the learning experience to meet the needs of all children and young people, in schools and early learning and care settings;
- Ensure equity of opportunity in education and that all children and young people are supported to fulfil their potential;
- Provide strategic leadership and support for the delivery of the right systems and infrastructure for the sector; and
- Organisational excellence and innovation.

The actions cover various aspects of the education system, such as curriculum and assessment, teacher supply and professional learning, special education and educational disadvantage, school infrastructure and transport, digital and climate action, quality assurance and evaluation, Irish language and *Gaeltacht* education, and stakeholder engagement and communication. Statements of Strategy are monitored through the DoE Annual Reports (Department of Education, 2022[5]). The Annual Reports summarise actions taken for each goal outlined in the Statement.

Monitoring of the Delivering Equality of Opportunity In Schools (DEIS) Plan is achieved primarily through targets set in the "National Strategy: Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life 2011-2020" (Department of Education and Skills, 2017[6]). The strategy was developed around six pillars:

- Enabling parents and communities to support children's literacy and numeracy development;
- Improving teachers' and early childhood care and education practitioners' professional practice;
- Building the capacity of school leadership;
- Improving the curriculum and the learning experience;
- Helping students with additional learning needs to achieve their potential; and
- Improving assessment and evaluation to support better learning in literacy and numeracy.

The strategy outlines targets for the education system (Department of Education and Skills, 2017[6]). It also sets out implementation plans with particular actions around each pillar and indicative dates for adopting

the actions to achieve the targets (ibid.). At the primary level, the targets are based on achievement in the National Assessments of Mathematics and English Reading (NAMER) 2014. At the post-primary level, the strategy sets Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) targets, and targets for the number of students taking higher level mathematics in Junior Cycle and Leaving Certificate Examinations.

Table 6.1 summarises some of these targets and provides an overview of results in NAMER 2021 and PISA 2022. Out of the four targets evaluated for DEIS Urban Band 1 primary schools in NAMER 2021, one was achieved while the remaining three were not met. These targets were established before the COVID-19 pandemic and, therefore, do not account for the disruption caused. Additionally, due to pandemic-related adjustments in the assessment process, data for four other DEIS Urban Band 1 school targets could not be collected. Despite these disruptions, the achievement gap between DEIS and non-DEIS schools did not widen. The DoE is finalising a new Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy. This will include updated indicators for literacy and numeracy development in DEIS schools.

Table 6.1. Targets in National Strategy: Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life

Primary schools					
Level	Class	Target for 2020 all primary schools	Value in NAMER 2021	Target for 2020 DEIS Urban Band 1 schools	Value in NAMER 2021
Reading: at or above Level 3	Second class	50%	44.1%	25%	25.0%
	Sixth class	50%	N/A	27%	N/A
Reading: at or below Level 1	Second class	20%	24.4%	40%	43.2%
	Sixth class	20%	N/A	40%	N/A
Mathematics: at or above Level 3	Second class	53%	N/A	30%	N/A
	Sixth class	50%	41.4%	27%	22.4%
Mathematics: at or below Level 1	Second class	20%	N/A	45%	N/A
	Sixth class	20%	27.3%	42%	48.6%
Post-primary schools					
Level		Target for 2020 all post-primary schools	Value in PISA 2022	Target for 2020 DEIS Post-primary schools	Value in PISA 2022
Reading: at or above Level 4		40%	35.4%	33%	N/A
Reading: at or above Level 5		12%	10.2%	10%	N/A
Reading: at or below Level 1		8.5%	11.3%	12%	N/A
Mathematics: at or above Level 4		36%	26.0%	29%	N/A
Mathematics: at or above Level 5		13%	7.2%	10%	N/A
Mathematics: at or below Level 1		10.5%	18.9%	16%	N/A

Note: The table only mentions targets specific to DEIS schools. NAMER 2021 assessed English reading achievement in the second class and mathematics achievement in the sixth class. Due to COVID-19 pandemic-related adjustments in the assessment process, data for four other DEIS Urban Band 1 school targets could not be collected. Values from PISA 2022 for DEIS post-primary schools have not yet been published.
Source: Department of Education and Skills (2017[6]), National Strategy: Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life 2011-2020, https://assets.gov.ie/24960/93c455d4440246cf8a701b9e0b0a2d65.pdf (accessed on 27 November 2023); Donohue et al. (2023[7]), Education in a Dynamic World: the performance of students in Ireland in PISA 2022, https://www.erc.ie/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/B23617-Education-in-a-Dynamic-World-Report-online-1.pdf (accessed on 17 June 2024); and Nelis and Gilleece (2023[8]), Ireland's National Assessments of Mathematics and English Reading 2021: A focus on achievement in urban DEIS schools, https://www.erc.ie/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/B23572-NAMER-DEIS-report-Online.pdf (accessed on 27 May 2024).

In addition, the DoE publishes and co-operates on several other strategic documents, such as the "National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030" (Department of Education and Skills, 2011[9]), "Digital Strategy for Schools to 2027" (Department of Education, 2022[10]), "Traveller and Roma Education Strategy" (Department of Education, 2023[11]), and "Housing for All Youth Homelessness Strategy 2023-2025"

(Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, 2022[12]), among others. Each of these also has specific targets or identifies data collections that can be used to monitor the outcomes.

The DoE has a range of datasets to monitor student academic and well-being outcomes at the system level, although not all have been fully utilised for this purpose (section Challenges). It maintains electronic databases, namely the Primary Online Database (POD) and the Post-primary Online Database (PPOD), which serve as repositories for a wide array of information about primary and post-primary school students (Table 6.2). These databases capture essential demographic details such as name, address, Personal Public Service Number (PPSN), gender, date of birth and nationality. Furthermore, the DoE collects additional data voluntarily and with explicit written consent from parents/guardians or students over 18. The POD includes information on the child's religion, while the PPOD records data on the student's mother tongue. Both databases also capture data on ethnic and cultural backgrounds.[1] The DoE also gathers a range of data on various aspects of the DEIS programme, including support and resources provided to DEIS schools and retention rates of students in schools. Primary schools must also report aggregate standardised test results from second-, fourth- and sixth-class levels (NCCA, 2017[13]). Junior Cycle and Leaving Certificate subject assessment results can be obtained from the State Examinations Commission at the individual student level (Department of Education, 2024[14]). These data also contained an indicator of fee waiver, which was used as a proxy for socio-economic background (Weir and Kavanagh, 2018[15]). However, since 2020, examination fees have been waived for all students, making this indicator no longer valid as a proxy for socio-economic background (Department of Education, 2022[16]). The PPOD database is used to publish regular reports on the retention of students at the post-primary level (Department of Education, 2023[17]).

Some of these data are analysed on behalf of the DoE by the Educational Research Centre (ERC), which conducts research, assessment and evaluation across all levels of the education system in Ireland (Department of Education, 2024[14]). Indeed, centrally-held administrative data have been examined to consider changes input and output variables, such as retention rates in post-primary schools and class sizes in primary schools (Kelleher and Weir, 2017[18]; Weir and Kavanagh, 2018[15]). The centre also collaborates with various agencies and initiates independent research projects. This includes involvement in international large-scale assessments and NAMER, further enriching the depth and breadth of education-related data available for analysis and policy formulation. These studies assess reading, mathematics and science at national and international levels, and collect contextual information from students, parents, teachers and principals (Table 6.2).

Table 6.2. Overview of key datasets available to the Department of Education

Name	Overview of information provided
Administrative data	
Primary Online Database	Name, address, Personal Public Service Number (PPSN), gender, date of birth and nationality, religion*, ethnic and cultural background*.
Post-primary Online Database	Name, address, PPSN, gender, date of birth and nationality, mother tongue*, ethnic and cultural background*.
Standardised assessments results	Aggregate primary school-level data from second, fourth and sixth classes. Individual-level subject grades at the post-primary level. These data also contain an indicator of fee waiver, which was used as a proxy for socio-economic background**.
School attendance	All state-aided schools report aggregate school-level data on total days lost by all students, total students absent for 20 or more days, total students suspended, and total students expelled. Data on students aged over six and under 16 who were absent for a cumulative total of 20 or more days by the reason for their absence collected at the student level. The data are gathered using the Tusla Portal hosted by Tusla - Child and Family Agency.
National large-scale assessments/surveys	
National Assessments of Mathematics and English Reading (NAMER)	Primary school students in selected second and sixth classes participate in the mathematics and English reading assessment. Students, parents, teachers and principals also complete questionnaires to gather contextual information.
Evaluation of the Digital Learning Framework (DLF)	The ERC evaluation of the implementation of the DLF involves collecting information from schools at baseline, and subsequently following the progress of representative samples of primary, post-primary and special schools with surveys of school staff and focus groups with school staff and students over multiple waves from 2019-2021.
International large-scale assessments	
Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS)	International assessment of reading of fourth-grade students. The study also collects contextual information from students, parents, teachers and principals.
Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)	International study of education examining reading, mathematics and science of 15-year-olds, along with contextual information from students, parents and principals.
Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS)	International assessment of mathematics and science of fourth and eighth-class students. The study also collects contextual information from students, parents, teachers and principals.

Note: * Collected voluntarily and with explicit written consent from parents/guardians or students over 18. ** Examination fees have been waived for all students since 2020, making this indicator no longer valid as a socio-economic background proxy (Department of Education, 2022[16]). The table aims to provide an overview, not an exhaustive list.

Several studies have also measured the well-being outcomes of students. For instance, the Growing Up in Ireland survey was used to monitor the outcomes of students from various backgrounds over time. Researchers examined the risk and protective factors for the mental health and well-being of children and young people at the age of 9 and then 13 (Nolan and Smyth, 2021[19]; Smyth et al., 2023[20]). The research examined both positive (life satisfaction) and negative (socio-emotional difficulties) aspects of mental health and well-being (ibid.). Children's School Lives Study follows two age cohorts – children who started the second class in 2018 and children who transitioned from preschool into Junior Infants (see Chapter 1) in 2019 (NCCA, UCD Dublin, n.d.[21]). Commissioned by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) and conducted by the University College Dublin School of Education, it aims to understand children's learning, well-being, engagement, and experiences of equality, diversity and inclusion (ibid.).

Furthermore, in carrying out NAMER, PIRLS, PISA and TIMSS, the ERC includes surveys of families, students and school staff to provide a contextual background and broader picture of the well-being of students from different socio-economic backgrounds. For instance, a study based on PISA 2018 results examined students' characteristics, home environments and parents' involvement in education. The researchers also considered school factors related to diversity of intake, resources, practices and school climate. They presented findings on non-cognitive outcomes and dispositions (well-being, attitudes and aspirations) (Nelis et al., 2021[22]). In NAMER 2021, researchers considered second- and sixth-class

primary students' achievement in relation to their characteristics, the characteristics of their schools and teachers, and access to and use of school resources (Gilleece and Nelis, 2023[23]).

Monitoring and evaluation at the school level

Ireland has a comprehensive school evaluation infrastructure. According to PISA 2022, 92.7% of students attended schools where principals reported that external evaluation exists as an arrangement aimed at quality assurance and improvements (either mandatory or on school's initiative), compared to 77.6% on average across OECD countries (Figure 6.1). Furthermore, all principals in Ireland reported that self-evaluation processes occur at their schools, compared to the OECD average of 95.3%.

Figure 6.1. External and internal evaluation practices

Based on principals' reports
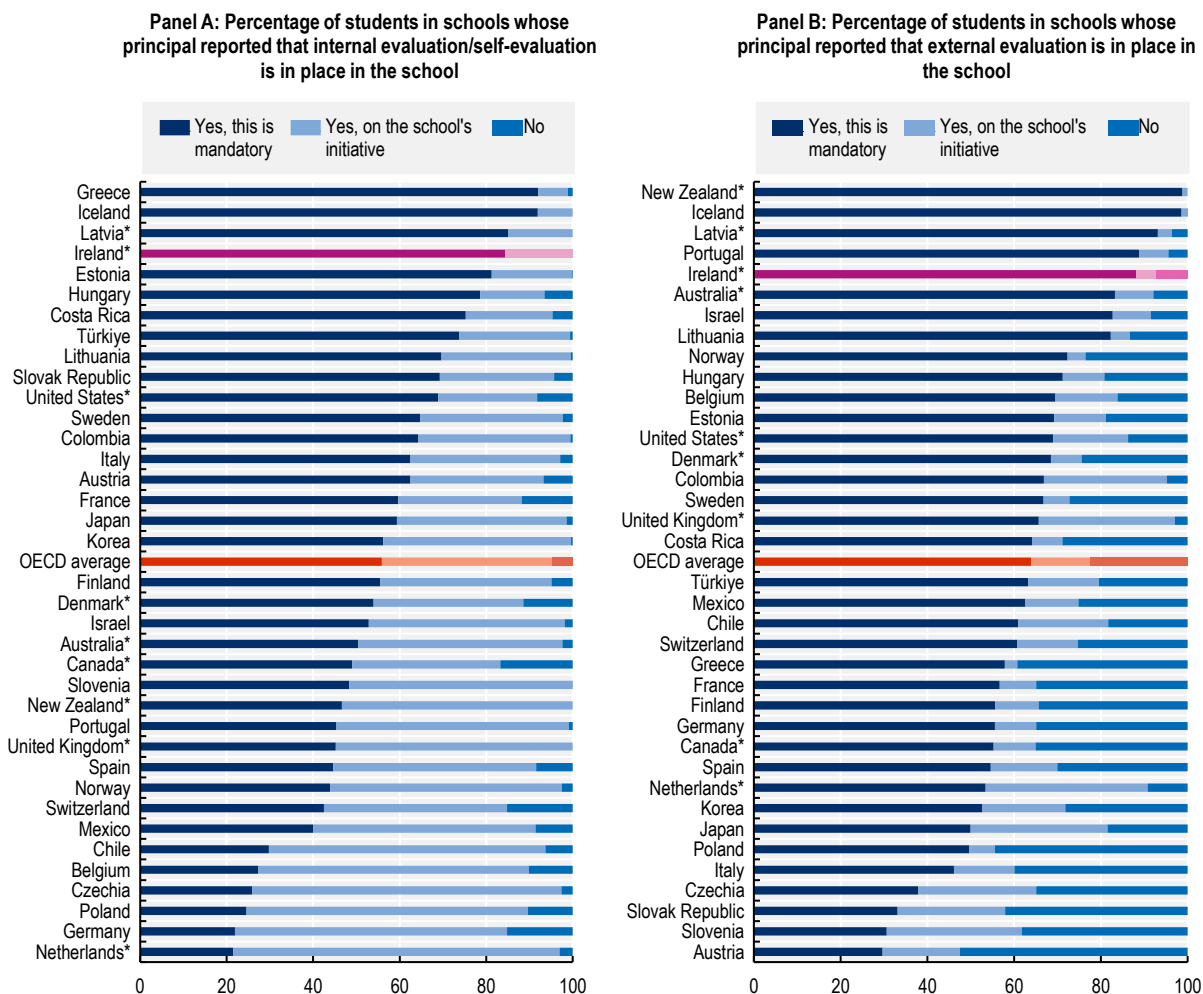
Panel A: Percentage of students in schools whose principal reported that internal evaluation/self-evaluation is in place in the school

Panel B: Percentage of students in schools whose principal reported that external evaluation is in place in the school

Note: * Caution is required when interpreting estimates because one or more PISA sampling standards were unmet in 2022 (see Reader's Guide, Annexes A2 and A4 in OECD (2023[24])).
Sorted in descending order of the percentage of students in schools whose principal reported that internal evaluation/self-evaluation (panel A) or external evaluation (panel B) is mandatory in the school.
Source: OECD (2023[25]), PISA 2022 Results (Volume II): Learning During – and From – Disruption, Table II.B1.6.58, https://doi.org/10.1787/a97db61c-en.

StatLink 🔗 https://stat.link/amlztr

In Ireland, the Inspectorate is responsible for external evaluation, although, as elaborated later, part of the external school review process is strengthening and promoting self-evaluation mechanisms. There were 1 820 inspection and advisory activities in the 3 095 primary schools and 851 inspection and advisory activities in 728 post-primary schools during the 2022 school year. 608 of the 1 820 inspection activities in primary schools took place in DEIS primary schools and 277 of the 851 inspection activities took place in DEIS Post-primary schools. Inspections are planned at the central and regional levels according to various criteria, including selecting schools on a risk basis (OECD, 2020[26]). Areas of enquiry include the quality of teaching and learning, the quality of leadership and management, and the quality of support for well-being (Department of Education, 2022[27]; Department of Education, 2022[28]). Outcomes are publicly

available on the website of the DoE and shared with education authorities (Department of Education, 2023[29]). The Inspectorate also conducts education-focused inspections in publicly-funded early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings (Department of Education, 2024[30]). Tusla - The Child and Family Agency (Tusla), the statutory regulator, inspects for compliance with education and care regulations in all ECEC settings (ibid.).

School self-evaluation (SSE) has received growing attention since 2012, when it became compulsory for all schools in the Irish education system. The SSE evaluation framework sees external and internal evaluation as complementary contributors to school improvement and capacity building. To support this, the Inspectorate published "Looking at Our School 2022: A Quality Framework for Primary and Special Schools" and "Looking at Our School 2022: A Quality Framework for Post-Primary Schools" (Department of Education, 2022[27]; Department of Education, 2022[28]). These frameworks provide a shared understanding of what effective and highly effective learning, teaching, leadership and management practices look like in the Irish school system, and a coherent set of standards that are used to inform both internal SSE and external inspection.

The Inspectorate also published "School Self-Evaluation Next Steps: September 2022 - June 2026" (Department of Education, 2022[31]). This publication is designed to further assist all schools to make SSE as effective as it can be to meet the needs of the children and young people they serve.

In essence, SSE is a collaborative, internal reflection, review and planning mechanism to advance various teaching, learning and well-being aspects. The focus of the SSE process varies across different types of schools in light of their context and the differentiated policy expectations nationally. Schools in the DEIS programme use the DEIS themes as the main focus of SSE. As part of this process, schools are asked to set specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time-specific targets, and to evaluate these annually by monitoring the impact of actions undertaken in the key DEIS themes. A school's DEIS Action Plan for Improvement is its school improvement plan for SSE, and no additional or separate plan is necessary (see section The system emphasises the role of self-evaluation for school improvement for more information) (Department of Education, 2023[32]).

Strengths

Ireland has strong expertise in monitoring and evaluation in regard to DEIS

The DoE is committed to monitoring and evaluation, highlighted by collaboration and close integration with the ERC, and evaluation of various pilot programmes. The system is further enriched by research initiatives undertaken by other external organisations. This is underpinned by heightened awareness of educational inequalities, their causes and consequences among Irish politicians (Reay, 2022[33]). For example, a report by the then Joint Committee on Education and Skills, a parliamentary body shadowing the DoE and other departments, acknowledged that "the current structure, where there is an unequal distribution of income and wealth, is being legitimised through the ideologies of meritocracy, and is acting to reproduce social class related inequalities" (Houses of the Oireachtas, 2019, p. 20[34]). This ecosystem contributes to Ireland's strong expertise in monitoring and evaluating education. As a result, the DoE has a wealth of evaluations at its disposal. These studies are quantitative and qualitative, and focus on primary and post-primary schools in and out of the DEIS programme. They also look at factors beyond student performance.

A strong expertise in monitoring and evaluation is exemplified by close collaboration with the academic and research sector, most notably the ERC. Established in 1966 and designated as a Statutory Body in 2015, the ERC collaborates closely with the DoE, undertaking research at all educational levels (Department of Education, 2024[14]). The ERC provides data for evidence-based decision-making through its extensive portfolio, including PIRLS, PISA, TIMSS and NAMER assessments. Moreover, the ERC

collaboration with the DoE on the evaluations of the DEIS programme exemplifies the synergy between academia and policy making. The ERC also engaged in subject-specific evaluations, examining, for instance, the impact of schemes like the Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) Scheme (Weir et al., 2018[35]). The DoE and ERC commitment to transparency is manifested through the publication of this diverse range of reports, fostering a culture of informed discourse and accountability. Indeed, the DoE (and Inspectorate's) close partnership with the ERC is a significant strength at both system and school levels. The national and international assessments facilitated by the ERC provide valuable steering data for the system, and the research is also combed into practice-centred findings that can help change approaches to teaching and learning. Furthermore, the ERC publishes guides for practitioners that help ground the research conclusions in practical terms for schools and teachers.

The DoE commitment to innovative educational initiatives is further evidenced by a range of pilot programmes, each targeting specific needs within the educational sector. The Rutland Street Pre-School Project is an early example, piloting methods later adopted in the Early Start project for ECEC (Department of Education, 2021[36]). The *Droichead* induction programme for newly qualified teachers, developed after a pilot, now plays a crucial role in professional development (Smyth et al., 2016[37]). Monitoring of the pilot involved distributing questionnaires and conducting interviews across participating schools, which provided data to explore the experience and effectiveness of the programme (ibid.). Furthermore, initially piloted and expanded, the Substitute Teacher Supply Panel Scheme reflects the DoE adaptive approach to addressing practical challenges in schools (Department of Education, 2022[38]). Even the HSCL Scheme (Chapter 5), now an essential programme for fostering partnerships between parents, teachers and the community to improve educational outcomes, started as a pilot (Weir et al., 2018[35]). The Scheme has been reviewed several times since its introduction as a mainstream intervention in 1993 (Archer and Shortt, 2003[39]; Ryan, 1994[40]; Weir et al., 2018[35]). Researchers collected questionnaire data from HSCL Coordinators on, e.g. time spent on activities relating to parents, activities relating to teachers and community-related activities (ibid.). Student achievement data were also collected as part of some of the reviews with achievement gains for some students (Weir et al., 2018[35]). Further details on these initiatives are explored in Chapters 4 and 5.

Furthermore, monitoring and evaluation are deeply integrated into the education system, with various institutions and organisations outside the public sector commissioning relevant research. For instance, Educate Together, a charity and patron of a network of over 100 schools, commissioned an evaluation of the Nurture Schools project to build resilience and improve children's social, emotional and mental health and well-being (Educate Together, 2023[41]). AsIAm, a charity helping people with autism, conducted research on school absence and withdrawal among children with autism (AsIAm, 2019[42]). The Irish Second-Level Students' Union surveyed students to highlight their views on the recently reformed Leaving Certificate Applied programme (ISSU, 2023[43]). Teaching Council, the regulator of the teaching profession in Ireland, promotes a culture of shared learning in which research and leading practice are encouraged and applied within the classroom setting (Teaching Council, n.d.[44]). To this end, the Council developed the Collaboration and Research for Ongoing Innovation Research Series to support a culture of shared learning and evidence-informed practice, and the Research Bursary Scheme that offers support to teachers wishing to carry out new research (Teaching Council, n.d.[44]; Teaching Council, n.d.[45]).

Studies and evaluations of the DEIS programme use a wide range of quantitative and qualitative sources

Evaluations of the DEIS programme at the primary level used a wide range of databases to estimate the programme's impact, from administrative data through large-scale national and international assessments to samples collected for specific research purposes. Quantitative approaches were both longitudinal and cross-sectional. Some researchers also considered various contextual factors to better discern the differences between DEIS and non-DEIS schools. Generally, the studies show that no matter the subject and class tested, students in the most disadvantaged DEIS Urban Band 1 schools underperform their

peers in DEIS Urban Band 2 schools (Cosgrove and Creaven, 2013[46]; Kavanagh and Weir, 2018[47]; Kavanagh, Weir and Moran, 2017[48]; McGinnity, Darmody and Murray, 2015[49]). In regard to primary DEIS Rural schools, evidence points to lower scores compared to non-DEIS schools, but, depending on the study, the difference can be either non-significant (Cosgrove and Creaven, 2013[46]; Delaney et al., 2023[50]; Gilleece, 2015[51]) or can disappear once taking into account a range of factors, including socio-economic background of students (Cosgrove and Creaven, 2013[46]; Gilleece, 2015[51]; McCoy, Quail and Smyth, 2014[52]). In contrast, the difference for DEIS Urban Band 1 schools often remains even after taking into account other factors, such as student social background, school resources, teacher factors, school climate and student engagement (Cosgrove and Creaven, 2013[46]; McCoy, Quail and Smyth, 2014[52]; McGinnity, Darmody and Murray, 2015[49]). There is also evidence suggesting that gaps between DEIS and non-DEIS schools, after taking into account a range of factors including socio-economic background of students, are decreasing over time, although this result only holds for mathematics and not reading in NAMER (Karakolidis et al., 2021[53]; Karakolidis et al., 2021[54]), and in mathematics and science in TIMSS (Duggan et al., 2023[55]). However, these results are not universal (e.g. see Karakolidis et al. (2021[54])). In contrast, the relationship between home resources for learning (a proxy for socio-economic background) and mathematics and science performance became stronger in the more recent cycles of TIMSS, even taking into account the DEIS status of primary schools (Duggan et al., 2023[55]).

Longitudinal studies were used to discern any improvements or regression in scores for a particular cohort of students. Depending on the study, year and sample size, conclusions broadly maintain that gaps between DEIS and non-DEIS schools are not widening (Kavanagh and Weir, 2018[47]; Smyth, McCoy and Kingston, 2015[56]). Some studies indicate improved students' literacy and numeracy test scores in DEIS primary schools over time (Kavanagh, Weir and Moran, 2017[48]; Smyth, McCoy and Kingston, 2015[56]). Moreover, the results revealed a decrease in the percentage of students in DEIS Urban schools scoring below the 10th national percentile and a slight increase among the top 10th national percentile, indicating that the decline in low scorers was not achieved at the expense of a reduction in high scorers (a possibility if an exclusive focus was placed on raising the achievement of lower-achieving students) (Weir et al., 2017[57]). However, researchers also observed a significant heterogeneity in school performance over time and some schools experienced a decrease rather than an increase in mathematics test scores (Kavanagh, Weir and Moran, 2017[48]).

Beyond student performance, attendance in primary schools has also seen improvements (Smyth, McCoy and Kingston, 2015[56]), although the results refer to before the COVID-19 pandemic. More recent statistics suggest that the gaps between DEIS and non-DEIS schools in some attendance indicators are widening (Tusla, 2023[58]). For instance, DEIS schools have traditionally experienced higher rates of students absent for 20 or more days. In 2019/20, the rate of 20-plus day absences in DEIS Urban Band 1 schools stood at 12.1%, compared to 5.0% for all primary schools (a gap of 7.1 percentage points). This rate increased to 27.2% in 2020/21, compared to 11.1% for all schools (16.1-point gap). For the 2021/22 school year, the absence rate stood at 57.6% compared to the national rate of 40.3% (17.3-point gap). However, the data quality is insufficient to make strong conclusions as school response rates were relatively low and the understanding of the requirement to record absences during the COVID-19 pandemic varied between schools (ibid.). Thus, an in-depth analysis which includes data from post-COVID years is needed to draw robust conclusions. Tusla Education Support Service (TESS), in partnership with the DoE, has also launched the National School Attendance Campaign 2023, and schools were provided with a once-off payment to promote and support regular school attendance through the Attendance Campaign Support Grant for Primary and Post-Primary Schools (Department of Education, 2023[59]; Department of Education, 2023[60]).

At the post-primary level, analyses reveal a nuanced picture of the impact of the DEIS programme. National PISA analyses show that students in DEIS schools underperformed those in non-DEIS schools (Donohue et al., 2023[7]; Gilleece et al., 2020[61]). Some researchers also suggested that the size of the gap has narrowed in reading until 2018 (it has not changed significantly in mathematics or science) (Gilleece et al.,

2020[61]). Using administrative data, researchers concluded that the gap in average Junior Certificate Overall Performance Score was narrowing between 2002 and 2011 (Weir et al., 2014[62]). Moreover, the Overall Performance Score of DEIS schools grew faster following the introduction of the DEIS programme in 2006/7 (ibid.). However, this improvement is inconsistent across all subjects, and the introduction of DEIS resources from 2008 to 2011 did not coincide with a significant increase in Junior Certificate mathematics performance (ibid.). A more recent study based on the same data looking at the 2002-2016 period indicates a positive trend of progress for students in DEIS Post-primary schools, showcasing a closing of the achievement gap in overall performance scores, English and mathematics (Weir and Kavanagh, 2018[15]). Despite the progress, students in DEIS schools consistently achieve lower average mathematics and science results than their peers in non-DEIS schools (Gilleece et al., 2020[61]).

The analyses also highlight a substantial social context effect. This indicates that being a student in a school with high concentrations of socio-economically disadvantaged students is significantly and negatively associated with achievement over and above the student's own socio-economic status (Weir and Kavanagh, 2018[15]). Furthermore, more recent research has shown variation in the association between student achievement and school socio-economic composition across the achievement distribution with a stronger association at its lower end, particularly in reading (Flannery, Gilleece and Clavel, 2023[63]). As outlined in other chapters, this suggests the need for integrated policies in education, housing and labour markets.

Beyond academic performance, DEIS Post-primary schools have demonstrated reductions in the total number of days lost through student absence and in the number of students absent for 20 days or more between 2015/16 and 2016/17 (Millar, 2017[64]). However, a more recent analysis shows that many principals in DEIS schools viewed unauthorised student absenteeism as a hindrance to learning (Nelis et al., 2021[22]). The COVID-19 pandemic has also impacted school absenteeism (Tusla, 2023[58]). In 2019/20, the rate of 20-plus day absences in DEIS schools stood at 17.1%, compared to 7.7% for all post-primary schools (a gap of 9.4 percentage points). This rate increased to 23.1% in 2020/21 in DEIS schools, compared to 9.7% for all schools (13.4-point gap). For the 2021/22 school year, the rate in DEIS schools stood at 36.8% compared to the national rate of 24.5% (12.3-point gap) (ibid.). However, further research and policy discussion are needed to identify ways of responding to and supporting schools with high levels of student absenteeism, as these data suffer from poor response rates from schools (ibid.). The understanding of the requirement to record absences during the COVID-19 pandemic also varied between schools.

Evidence exists that the gap between DEIS and non-DEIS schools in retention rates has narrowed over time (Smyth, McCoy and Kingston, 2015[56]; Weir and Kavanagh, 2018[15]), and the DoE publishes regular updates on gaps in retention rates between DEIS and non-DEIS schools, as well as by socio-economic status (Department of Education, 2023[17]). The DEIS gap in retention rate until the Leaving Certificate has fallen from 15.6 percentage points for the 2003 entry cohort to 8.4 points for the 2016 cohort (Department of Education, 2023[65]) (see also Chapter 1). Finally, in terms of student well-being outcomes, broadly speaking, there were no significant differences between students in DEIS and non-DEIS post-primary schools, whether looking at meaning in life, self-efficacy or bullying (Nelis et al., 2021[22]).

Evaluations of the DEIS programme were also qualitative. For instance, early evaluations of the DEIS programme included focus groups with school staff (Weir and Archer, 2011[66]). These revealed, for example, widespread approval for the role of school development planning. During visits, the Inspectorate also regularly interviews principals, teachers, students and parents/guardians. Based on these interviews, evaluations of the DEIS programme benefitted from a combination of quantitative and qualitative data.

However, as elaborated in the section on Challenges, none of the studies included an identification strategy (e.g. with a control group) that would enable causal implications of the DEIS programme on student outcomes. The second policy recommendation outlines methodologies that could help estimate the causal

effects of the programme, although application of such methods is contingent on the availability of appropriate data.

The system emphasises the role of self-evaluation for school improvement

School self-evaluation (SSE) is a crucial aspect of educational practice among OECD countries, reflecting a commitment to continuous improvement. Internally driven by school community members, SSE systematically examines and reflects on current practices, steering towards future goals (Barry et al., 2022[67]). SSE places the entire learning organisation under scrutiny, emphasising improvement and reflection as primary objectives (Brady, 2019[68]; Skerritt and Salokangas, 2019[69]). School self-evaluation is a long-established process in OECD education systems. In some, the practice is required by law, while in other countries, it is recommended or required only indirectly (e.g. by developing school guidelines) (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2015[70]; OECD, 2015[71]). The prevalence of SSE is underscored by the fact that, in 2022, 19 out of 34 OECD education systems provided guidelines for assessing equity and inclusion within the SSE framework (OECD, 2023[3]).

The significance of SSE lies in its ability to empower schools to analyse their strengths and weaknesses (OECD, 2015[71]). Internal evaluation, however, can go beyond mere assessment, fostering ownership of change and sensitivity to areas needing improvement (Godfrey, 2020[72]). It serves as a valuable tool for identifying continuing professional learning needs for teachers and promoting on-going advancement in instructional practices. In the realm of equity and inclusion, SSE can become a catalyst for positive change. The process can lead to revisions in curriculum content or organisation, provision of targeted support for specific student groups, and the identification of barriers hindering inclusive education (OECD, 2023[3]). Analysing aspects such as school climate, relationships, learning support and barriers to continuing professional learning, SSE becomes a mechanism for schools to identify and address challenges in creating an inclusive environment. SSE can also foster increased reflection. Indeed, an initiative in 2022-23 under the Irish Presidency of the European Schools involved Irish higher education institutions providing teachers in the European Schools network with reflective practice trigger papers, tools, collaborative techniques, approaches to assist professional engagement among teachers, and supports for collaborative school improvement (Department of Education, 2024[14]).

A well-structured framework for school self-evaluation exists in Ireland

Since its formal integration into the Irish school system in 2012, the SSE process has become a cornerstone in enhancing the quality of education for students in Ireland. Governed by Looking at Our School (LAOS) 2022 quality frameworks and informed by "School Self-Evaluation: Next Steps September 2022 – June 2026", SSE serves as a collaborative, internal reflection, review and planning mechanism aimed at advancing various aspects of teaching, learning and well-being (Department of Education, 2022[31]; Department of Education, 2023[73]). The SSE process is grounded in a culture of critical reflection and inquiry. This culture is also nurtured through crucial elements such as teacher professionalism, sharing of classroom practices, authentic assessment, developmental classroom observation, and professional feedback and peer learning (Department of Education, 2022[31]). Furthermore, authentic engagement with students and parents is integral to building a supportive SSE culture.

The SSE process follows a structured six-step framework, allowing schools to adapt it to their specific context and focus areas (Department of Education, 2022[31]). The process begins with collaboratively identifying a focus for SSE, ensuring its scope significantly impacts students' learning and well-being, teaching quality, school leadership, and provision for equity and inclusion (Figure 6.2). Subsequently, schools gather evidence through various qualitative and quantitative sources, ensuring it is manageable, valuable and focused. The analysis and judgment phase involves bringing together the collected evidence,

identifying central themes and reflecting on findings in reference to the LAOS quality frameworks (Department of Education, 2022[31]; Department of Education, 2023[73]).

As part of the SSE process, schools must undertake a well-being review underpinned by the "Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice 2018-2023" (Department of Education and Skills, 2019[74]). Indeed, in the quality framework underpinning SSE and the work of the Inspectorate, student well-being has been recognised "both as an outcome of learning and as an enabler of learning" (Department of Education, 2022, p. 6[27]). Especially pertinent after the COVID-19 pandemic, this SSE frameworks provide tools and resources for schools to explore ways of promoting student well-being (Department of Education, 2022[27]; Department of Education, 2022[28]). These are complemented by materials provided by the National Educational Psychological Service, and curriculum materials developed by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) to support well-being in Early Years, Primary and Post-primary Curricula (Department of Education, 2023[75]; NCCA, 2024[76]).

Once the analysis is complete, schools write and share a report and improvement plan, documenting the main findings and agreed-upon improvement actions. The annual report and improvement plan are shared with board members and staff, with considerations for sharing critical points with parents and students. Notably, the SSE report and improvement plan are intended as internal tools for school development rather than broader public communication (Department of Education, 2022[31]).

The subsequent steps involve implementing the improvement plan and monitoring actions while evaluating their impact. Clarity on responsibility for implementation, timeframes and methods for monitoring impact is crucial during these phases (Department of Education, 2022[31]). These steps ensure that SSE outcomes have a tangible and positive effect on learning and teaching experiences, including students' well-being.

Figure 6.2. School self-evaluation process

Source: Adapted from Department of Education (2022[31]), School Self-Evaluation: Next Steps September 2022-June 2026, https://assets.gov.ie/232734/3e6ca885-96ec-45a6-9a08-3e810b7cd1ea.pdf (accessed on 27 November 2023).

Three levels of support are available to further aid schools in their SSE processes (Department of Education, 2022[31]). Level 1 offers regional SSE information sessions, support and advisory visits, webinars, presentations, newsletters and advisory engagements tailored to the schools' context. Level 2 envisions a complementary relationship between internal and external evaluation, aiming for a two-way flow of information. Level 3 encourages collaboration within and among schools. For instance, the Shared Evaluation for Learning Project brings together the Inspectorate and school leadership in a small sample of schools to collaboratively evaluate the quality of an aspect of teaching and learning in the school (ibid.). As mentioned in the section on Contextual background, most students attended schools where principals reported undertaking self-evaluation in 2022. Earlier results also show that DEIS schools exhibited a slightly higher percentage (97%) of self-evaluation than non-DEIS schools (95%) (Shiel et al., 2022[77]).

School self-evaluation is viewed as a necessary and inherently positive process in the DEIS programme

The DEIS action planning process is pivotal in driving systematic improvements in schools receiving additional support and resources through the DEIS programme. Since its introduction in 2005, DEIS has mandated schools to engage in a comprehensive self-evaluation action planning process, focusing on specific improvement themes (Department of Education, 2022[78]). The DEIS action planning process involves developing a three-year improvement plan, addressing key themes such as attendance, retention, literacy, numeracy, supporting educational transitions, partnership with parents and others, examination attainment (post-primary schools only), leadership, well-being, and continuing professional learning. It focuses on how the school intends to ensure that its DEIS supports (see Chapter 1) are targeted at students most at risk of educational disadvantage. The emphasis on SMART targets (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-bound) aims to ensure a clear, focused and strategic approach to improvement efforts (ibid.).

Integral to the DEIS action planning process is the involvement of students, parents, local communities and agencies operating at the local level (Department of Education, 2022[78]). This collaborative dimension is essential in outlining strategies and interventions to achieve SMART targets, ensuring that interventions are designed to meet the needs of the most-at-risk students. Furthermore, the process underscores the importance of targeting DEIS support, including using the DEIS grant, toward students most at risk of educational disadvantage (Department of Education, 2023[32]).

In alignment with the broader context of SSE, DEIS schools must engage in a six-step SSE process to devise their DEIS action plan (Department of Education, 2022[78]). This process involves gathering evidence, analysing data, setting priorities for development and improvement, writing and sharing the plan, implementing the plan, and evaluating its impact (ibid.). The annual review allows schools to examine progress, assess target achievement, and refine plans based on changing educational needs. DEIS schools are not obliged to operate a parallel planning process involving one set of plans for DEIS and another for SSE (Department of Education, 2018[79]).

The Inspectorate also evaluated DEIS action planning in 2017-2020 (Department of Education, 2022[78]). The effectiveness of the process was underscored by a strong culture of planning for improvement observed in the inspected schools. Principals had established structures, such as appointing a DEIS coordinator and establishing DEIS teams, to promote planning for improvement as a shared responsibility among the leadership team and staff. In the most effective DEIS schools, the DEIS action plan became integral to the core work of the school, particularly in shaping teaching and learning. Teachers' planning and subject plans often reflected the DEIS action plan, indicating a seamless integration of whole-school DEIS strategies, especially in primary schools. Other successful elements included setting high expectations for all students, using explicit teaching strategies, collaborative teaching practices, and evidence-informed interventions to bolster literacy, numeracy and well-being. Notably, DEIS action planning served as a mechanism for schools to manage change and develop their agenda for school

improvement. It fostered ownership among teachers, promoting a shared commitment to the change agenda and overall school improvement (ibid.).

The Inspectorate serves a vital role in school evaluation

The Inspectorate in Ireland is crucial in ensuring the standards and quality of education provision across various educational settings, including ECEC settings, primary, post-primary and special schools, and others (Department of Education, 2023[80]). The primary objective of the Inspectorate is to assure quality and public accountability within the education system. This is achieved through a multifaceted approach, including school inspections, focused or thematic evaluations and the publication of various reports (ibid.). Indeed, one of the critical functions of the Inspectorate is the publication of inspection reports on schools. In Ireland, the Inspectorate conducts various types of inspections across primary and post-primary schools (Department of Education, 2023[29]):

- **Whole school evaluations** assess the overall quality of school management, leadership, teaching, learning and assessment, with variations in processes for primary and post-primary schools;
- **Curriculum evaluations in primary schools** focus on specific subjects, evaluating the quality of students' learning, how the school supports learning, and the school's planning for the subject;
- **Subject inspections in post-primary schools** assess individual subjects, evaluating teaching, learning and departmental planning;
- **Programme evaluations** inspect specific programmes in post-primary schools, such as Transition Year and the Leaving Certificate Applied programme, focusing on planning and teaching quality;
- **Follow-through inspections** gauge a school's progress in implementing recommendations from previous inspections;
- **Specialised or thematic inspections**, with a research focus, are employed to examine specific subjects or issues, providing oral feedback and a written report to the school, and often contributing to national reports summarising identified trends;
- **Evaluation of inclusive practices and provision for students with additional and special educational needs in primary and post-primary schools** evaluates the quality of inclusive practices in a school and the provision for students in receipt of additional support from the school;
- **Child protection and safeguarding inspections** monitor the implementation of the Child Protection Procedures for primary and post-primary schools in a sample of schools annually;
- **Incidental inspections** are unannounced inspections that evaluate aspects of the work of a school under the normal conditions of a regular school day; and
- **Evaluation of action planning for improvement in DEIS schools** focuses on how schools devise, implement and monitor Action Plans for Improvement for the DEIS themes. It also enables inspectors to evaluate the effectiveness of schools implementing specific interventions and initiatives.

Reports are published on all inspections except incidental inspections. The Inspectorate reports provide a comprehensive overview of the quality of learning and teaching, offering findings, recommendations and examples of best practices. The Inspectorate's commitment to transparency is evident in its provision of oral feedback to the school community after inspections, coupled with the publication of detailed written reports on its website (Department of Education, 2023[29]). More information about how these publications feed into policy making is provided in Chapter 2.

The Inspectorate places a strong focus on the evaluation of DEIS schools individually and at the system level

As mentioned before, the Inspectorate carried out 1 820 inspection and advisory activities in 3 095 primary schools and 851 inspection and advisory activities in 728 post-primary schools in 2022; 608 of the 1 820 inspection activities in primary schools took place in schools in the DEIS programme and 277 of the 851 inspection activities took place in DEIS Post-primary schools. As part of the inspection programme in DEIS schools, the Inspectorate also carries out evaluations of the quality of action planning for improvement in a sample of primary and post-primary schools (Department of Education, 2023[29]).

The Inspectorate's goal is to provide DEIS Post-primary schools with some form of inspection every two years, ranging from short, one-day unannounced incidental inspections, to more intensive whole-school evaluations and inspections (see above for more details). The planning process for inspections at the primary level is based on a range of criteria, including length of time since previous inspection and recommendations from earlier reports. The inspection programme at primary and post-primary levels also includes follow-through inspections, which evaluate the progress that school leadership, in collaboration with the school community, has made in implementing some or all of the main recommendations made in an earlier inspection. Follow-through inspections typically happen within two years of the original inspection. However, for schools where significant challenges are identified, the follow-up visit takes place sooner and may involve other inspection models (including, for example, subject and programme inspections, improvement monitoring or management evaluations).

The Inspectorate's evaluation process also involves a comprehensive examination of DEIS schools, encompassing leadership, teaching quality and overall school improvement. It has developed a dedicated model, the Evaluation of Action Planning for Improvement in DEIS Schools, focusing on the effectiveness of school-based action planning processes in DEIS Urban Band 1 primary and DEIS Post-primary schools (Department of Education, 2022[78]). This model, which has been in use since 2010, involves annual evaluations, the findings of which are published in composite reports.

The "Looking at DEIS Action Planning for Improvement in Primary and Post-Primary Schools" publication is the first of three reports intended to review and evaluate the implementation of the DEIS Plan 2017 (Department of Education, 2022[78]). This report provides insights into various aspects, including school life, leadership of DEIS action planning, and the quality of teaching, learning and professional development. The subsequent reports will delve into DEIS action planning for literacy, numeracy and examination attainment, and themes like attendance, retention, transitions, and partnership with parents and the school community. The report emphasises the importance of shared responsibility and ownership of the DEIS action plan within school leadership teams and staff. The distributed leadership responsibilities contribute to establishing structures that promote planning for improvement (ibid.).

The report's findings highlight positive efforts in DEIS schools, with many interventions implemented to enhance literacy, numeracy and student well-being (Department of Education, 2022[78]). The commitment to creating inclusive classrooms is acknowledged, with differentiated supports provided within mainstream settings. Collaboration between teachers and special education teachers to meet students' diverse needs was evident in primary and some post-primary schools (ibid.).

However, the report identifies areas for improvement, particularly in post-primary schools (Department of Education, 2022[78]). It recommends additional support for building inclusive school and classroom environments. Specifically, the National Council for Special Education was advised to provide assistance in implementing team teaching within mainstream classrooms and to offer guidance on the best methods for supporting differentiation in various subject areas (ibid.).

Challenges

Limited use of granular and combined administrative data

The section on Contextual background described the wealth of information available to the DoE and the Irish system's strong expertise in monitoring and evaluation. However, despite the wealth of information available, certain gaps persist. The most prominent challenge is that the DoE has not yet fully reaped the potential of the data estimating the socio-economic background of the areas where students reside based on HP Index scores (more on the HP Index in Chapter 1). HP Index scores are supplied to the DoE at the student and school levels. Yet, the DoE, research and academia have not yet utilised these data to a large extent, although some progress has been made in this regard in recent years (e.g. the DoE is now using HP Index scores to assess the impact of disadvantage on retention outcomes (Department of Education, 2023[65])).

It is recognised that not all students at risk of educational disadvantage are enrolled in schools in the DEIS programme, and the number/proportion of students at risk of educational disadvantage not in DEIS schools is currently unpublished at the population level. It is also publicly unknown what proportion of the most disadvantaged students are enrolled in DEIS schools. Likewise, there are students in schools in the DEIS programme who are not at risk of educational disadvantage. For instance, findings from PIRLS 2021 show that about 60% of participating students in DEIS Urban Band 1 primary schools were in the lowest socio-economic quartile, while 5% were in the highest socio-economic quartile (Delaney et al., 2023[50]). In contrast, in non-DEIS schools, 19% of PIRLS students were in the lowest socio-economic quartile and 29% were in the highest (ibid.). All of these areas would benefit from a deeper analysis of the HP Index data interacted with the DEIS school status.

Non-administrative data sources have been widely used to partially fill this gap. For instance, the Growing up in Ireland and NAMER surveys offer a wealth of background characteristics, including social class, parental education, household income and family structure, and an indicator of whether the student attends a DEIS school (Smyth, McCoy and Kingston, 2015[56]). However, surveys based on self-reported information suffer from missing data. In NAMER 2009, almost a fifth of students did not report their socio-economic background (Eivers et al., 2010[81]). In NAMER 2021, socio-economic background information was unavailable for any students as the parent/guardian questionnaire was not administered due to changes in study procedures associated with the COVID-19 pandemic (Nelis and Gilleece, 2023[8]). In PIRLS 2021, 7% of parents did not complete the questionnaire that included socio-economic information (Delaney et al., 2023[50]). In both NAMER 2009 and PIRLS 2021, the missing pattern was not completely random: those who did not report their socio-economic background were often more likely to score lower in reading and mathematics (Delaney et al., 2023[50]; Eivers et al., 2010[81]).

Indeed, without access to population-wide student-level data on socio-economic background, research is often hindered by small sample sizes and non-response rates. For instance, analyses of available survey data suggest that gaps between DEIS and non-DEIS schools can persist even after considering students' socio-economic background (see section Studies and evaluations of the DEIS programme use a wide range of quantitative and qualitative sources). These contextual effects are often most pronounced in the most disadvantaged DEIS Urban Band 1 schools. In contrast, the findings suggest the absence of contextual effects in DEIS Rural schools, i.e. once the socio-economic background of students is taken into account, there are no significant differences in reading and mathematics scores compared to non-DEIS schools. This result holds even after accounting for other factors, such as school resources, teacher factors, school climate and student engagement. The authors sometimes suggest that there is a "threshold effect" where concentrations of disadvantage beyond a particular point result in lower levels of achievement (McCoy, Quail and Smyth, 2014[52]). Nonetheless, the limitations imposed by small sample sizes and non-response rates underscore the need for comprehensive student-level data to deepen the analysis of socio-economic factors in education research.

Furthermore, many of these analyses can only assess average outcomes, limiting the ability to discern variations in performance between DEIS and non-DEIS schools for specific student groups, particularly those from highly disadvantaged backgrounds (Smyth, McCoy and Kingston, 2015[56]). The achievement gap between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged schools encompasses two components: (a) the disparity in achievement among individual students from diverse social backgrounds, and (b) the "multiplier effect", i.e. the additional impact of the concentration of disadvantage within a school. Currently, the absence of individual student background data impedes the capacity of researchers to differentiate between these two components, precluding a comparison between students from disadvantaged backgrounds attending DEIS schools and those attending more socially mixed schools (ibid.).

The OECD review team learned that there are capacity, technical and legislative barriers to sharing, using and disaggregating administrative data. Capacity issues between public institutions in sharing data can arise from various factors. One challenge is the lack of standardised data formats and interoperability standards across different institutions. Public agencies often employ disparate systems and databases that may not seamlessly communicate with one another, leading to difficulties in exchanging information efficiently. Additionally, varying levels of technological infrastructure and resources among institutions can hinder their ability to implement and maintain robust data-sharing mechanisms. Furthermore, limited funding and budget constraints may impede the development of comprehensive data-sharing infrastructures and staff training to handle such initiatives. Indeed, the "Review of DEIS" report by the-then Department of Education and Skills identified that "a specific data analytics function" is required in the DoE, which is "properly resourced with appropriately qualified staff to manage and interrogate the data as required for on-going [DoE] business needs" (Department of Education and Skills, n.d., p. 36[82]).

Data security and privacy concerns further complicate the sharing process, as institutions must navigate complex legal and ethical frameworks to ensure compliance. In Ireland, as in many other countries, it is feared that data may be misused to, e.g. maintain or deepen power relationships between majority and minority population groups (Balestra and Fleischer, 2018[83]; Durante, Volpato and Fiske, 2009[84]; Simon and Piché, 2012[85]). This is of particular concern in countries where, e.g. ethnicity-based data was used in the past to provide the basis for discriminatory practices, and for groups that have in the past experienced ethnic profiling, segregation, genocide and violence (Balestra and Fleischer, 2018[83]).

Despite these challenges, the DoE is engaging in analysis of administrative data including, to some extent, the HP Index. For instance, the DoE tracks the 2016 cohort in terms of retention rates, where students are disaggregated by the level of affluence based on the HP Index (Department of Education, 2023[65]). In regard to other administrative data sources, the ERC has used the possession of a medical card as a proxy for student-level socio-economic background. Medical card holders can get certain health services free of charge. Additionally, the card holders receive an examination fee waiver (Weir and Kavanagh, 2018[15]). To qualify for a medical card, the income must be below a specific figure for the family size (Citizens Information, 2023[86]). However, since 2020 (when examination fees were waived in response to changes with state examinations due to the COVID-19 pandemic), information on student possession of a medical card has not been available in state examination databases (Department of Education, 2024[14]).

Absence of a control group and causal implications in DEIS evaluations

A related challenge to the lack of granular and combined administrative data is the absence of a control group in evaluations of the DEIS programme. This drawback has been repeatedly identified in almost all studies that aimed to guide the programme's impacts (Smyth, McCoy and Kingston, 2015[56]; Weir and Denner, 2013[87]; Weir et al., 2014[62]; Weir et al., 2018[35]). While the use of a control group may also have ethical implications (Golden, 2020[88]), its absence means that it is impossible to analyse truly comparable groups when looking at student outcomes and, as such, theoretically estimate the DEIS programme's causal effects (Gilleece and Clerkin, 2024[89]; Kavanagh, Weir and Moran, 2017[48]). The challenge of establishing causality is not exclusive to the assessment of DEIS or educational evaluation in Ireland. It is

acknowledged as a significant hurdle in evaluating educational policy initiatives internationally (European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, 2022[90]; Golden, 2020[88]).

Estimating the causal impacts of the DEIS programme is, of course, inherently challenging due to the presence of numerous pre-existing educational initiatives (Gilleece and Clerkin, 2024[89]). Given the extensive history of prior programmes, the difficulty lies in developing a strategy for identifying the causal mechanism, i.e. precisely identifying the commencement of DEIS and the "treatment group" (ibid.). Moreover, the successes attributed to DEIS are intertwined with the cumulative impacts of earlier initiatives, such as Breaking the Cycle, making it intricate to isolate and attribute specific causal effects to the DEIS programme (INTO and Educational Disadvantage Centre, 2015[91]). Indeed, research suggests that there was a considerable overlap of schools having access to various programmes later integrated under the DEIS umbrella (Weir and Archer, 2005[92]). Furthermore, the success of the implementation of different programmes, before and after the introduction of the DEIS programme, might vary among schools (Gilleece and Clerkin, 2024[89]).

Other challenges relate to the potential indirect effects of the DEIS programme due to staff (and students) moving between DEIS and non-DEIS schools with varying levels of expertise, continuing professional learning and experience (Gilleece and Clerkin, 2024[89]). Other indirect effects might relate to providing extra-curricular activities (that might improve students' academic and non-academic outcomes) based on their enrolment in a DEIS school (ibid.). Furthermore, DEIS is not the only initiative implemented in the education system, and it might be challenging to disentangle the effect of DEIS from other policies, strategies and supports (ibid.). If unaccounted for, all these effects can bias even those methodologies that aim to provide causal estimates, including those involving control groups. In general, greater policy evaluation also assumes a conducive socio-political environment, as barriers to effective evaluation can arise from (political) conflicts, timing issues and other factors, which may hinder planning and the institutionalisation of evaluation practices (Golden, 2020[88]).

The absence of the control group and causal estimates have, however, important policy implications in terms of resourcing. Difficulties in establishing causal effects impede the accurate measurement of the DEIS programme's impact on student outcomes and raise critical questions about the allocation of resources. Limited attention has been devoted to assessing whether the additional funding allocated to DEIS schools can narrow the resource gap between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged schools (Smyth, McCoy and Kingston, 2015[56]). Without causal estimates, policy makers face challenges in determining whether observed changes in student achievement can be attributed to the DEIS programme or other factors and, as such, determining the value for money for the public investment. Consequently, the absence of causal estimates compromises the ability to make informed decisions in regard to optimising and allocating resources for educational interventions. This underscores the need for improved methodologies and data collection strategies to address these limitations and ensure a more rigorous evaluation of the DEIS programme's effectiveness, ultimately guiding more effective resource allocation and shaping evidence-based educational policies.

There is little capacity for data-informed improvement planning in DEIS schools

DEIS schools are expected to gather evidence and analyse data as part of the six-step self-evaluation that underpins the DEIS action planning process. However, some post-primary schools' capacity to collect, interpret and use data to develop evidence-informed improvement strategies remains limited. Inspection reports have highlighted schools' ability to use "assessment data to inform teaching and learning, to monitor how effective different teaching strategies are and to highlight areas for professional learning for staff members" as a key element of success for DEIS schools (Department of Education, 2022, p. 42[78]).

At the school level, there is a wealth of data generated through assessments and the action planning process that can – if used effectively – help them to provide their students with the right supports at the right time (e.g. data on attendance, parental involvement, performance, etc.). This includes analysing data

from formative and summative assessments against measurable targets, and other information, such as the views and perspectives of teachers, parents/guardians and students. However, the OECD review team's impressions were aligned with the Inspectorate's (Department of Education, 2022[78]) assessment that not all schools are confident in setting SMART targets and collecting and analysing data to evaluate their performance against them.

Overall, post-primary teachers in Ireland appear to have rapidly improved their digital skills throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, showing one of the most remarkable improvements among OECD countries. Between 2018 and 2022, the proportion of principals who agreed or strongly agreed that their teachers had the necessary technical and pedagogical skills to integrate digital devices into their instruction rose by more than 40 percentage points, from 49.3% to 95.3% (OECD, 2023[25]). In addition, 82.0% of principals were confident that teachers had effective professional resources to learn how to use digital devices (ibid.).

This improvement in digital literacy provides a sound basis for strengthening teachers' and principals' use of data for decision making. Stakeholders interviewed by the OECD review team concurred that the external support provided to schools had improved since the self-evaluation process was introduced in 2012/13. Professional Development Support for Teachers (PDST) (now *Oide*) offers post-primary school leadership teams an opportunity to engage in a one-year programme on data and research-informed school planning (PDST, n.d.[93]) and the Inspectorate is offering advisory visits (upon school request) to support the robust use of school-level data for the action planning process. Nevertheless, the OECD review team formed the impression that most principals had not yet received sufficient training or guidance and were not aware or availing themselves of the support on offer.

A frequently reported impediment to the digital transformation of schools is a lack of technical support. In 2022, 63.2% of 15-year-old students were in schools where principals reported that they were lacking qualified technical assistant staff (Figure 6.3). This was among the highest proportions among OECD countries and significantly above the OECD average of 41.2%. This shortage of technical assistant staff was particularly felt in rural schools, where 76.9% of students were in schools where principals reported a lack. Although socio-economically disadvantaged schools were more likely to report lacking technical assistance than advantaged schools (66.0% vs. 58.9%), this difference was not statistically significant (OECD, 2023[25]).

Figure 6.3. Lack of qualified technical assistant staff (2022)

Percentage of 15-year-old students in schools whose principals disagreed or strongly disagreed that the school has sufficient qualified technical assistant staff
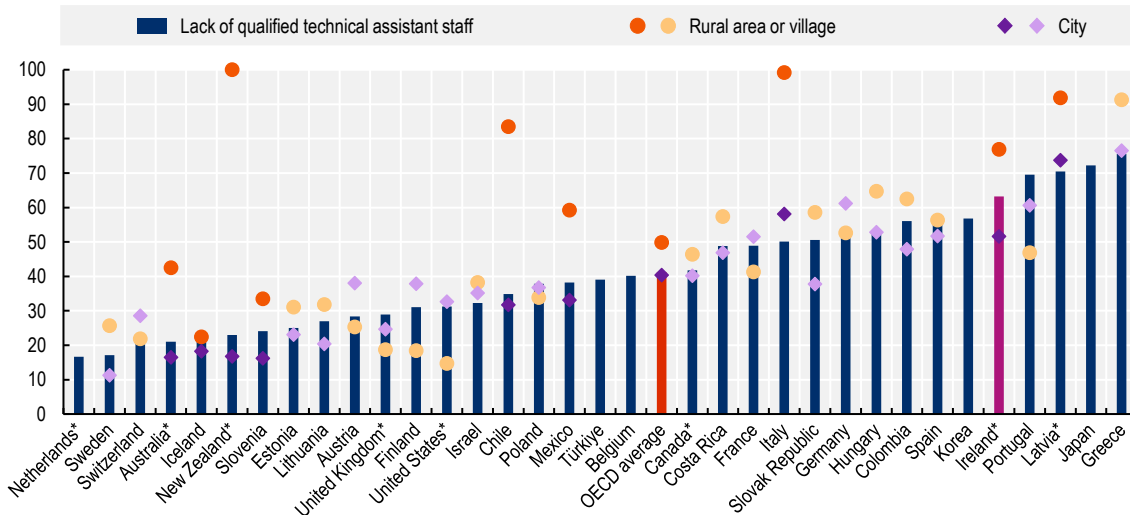
Note: * Caution is required when interpreting estimates because one or more PISA sampling standards were unmet in 2022 (see Reader's Guide, Annexes A2 and A4 in OECD (2023[24])). Rural areas or villages are communities with fewer than 3 000 people, and cities are those with over 100 000 people. Statistically significant differences are shown in darker tones.
Sorted in ascending order of the percentage of students in schools whose principal reported a lack of qualified technical assistant staff.
Source: OECD (2023[25]), PISA 2022 Results (Volume II): Learning During – and From – Disruption, Table II.B1.5.31, https://doi.org/10.1787/a97db61c-en.

StatLink 🔗📊 https://stat.link/r9late

This perceived lack of technical support has also been identified as a key impediment to embedding digital technologies in teaching, learning and assessment in the "Digital Strategy for Schools to 2027" (Department of Education, 2022[10]). Yet, the need to build digital capacity extends beyond the classroom and teachers' use of digital education technologies. To ensure the effective use of data for school improvement more generally, capacity building will need to extend to the school leadership and beyond.

Policy recommendations

Implement more comprehensive data integration and analysis in education policy making

The effective use of data is pivotal for crafting policies that cater to the diverse needs of students. Recognising this, there is a growing emphasis on the need to harness the full potential of administrative data to better understand and address the challenges faced by students. To this end, enhancing the educational system's efforts and capability to utilise detailed data more effectively is important. It comprises two fundamental strategies: strengthening the analysis of student-level HP Index information in the short-term, and fostering stronger inter-departmental collaborations to expand the range of student background characteristics in the long-term. In addition, it is recommended to improve monitoring by utilising standardised assessments. Together, these initiatives have the potential to transform the landscape of data utilisation, paving the way for more informed and effective decision making.

Such data integration could benefit the DoE and also a broader spectrum of stakeholders. For instance, enhancing data quality and integrating data from different datasets was highlighted among the recent key OECD recommendations for tackling child poverty and improving outcomes for children and young people, including implementing Young Ireland, the National Policy Framework for Children and Young People (0-24) 2023-28 (OECD, 2024[94]).

Enhance the analysis of student-level HP Index data

While the primary goal of the DEIS programme is to address concentrations of disadvantage in schools, the OECD review team believes that understanding what proportions of disadvantaged students are targeted by the DEIS programme, accounting for demographic and economic changes, is crucial for informed decision making, especially in regard to the inclusion of more schools in the DEIS programme. Indeed, one of the recommendations in Chapter 3 is to examine scenarios to attenuate the adverse effects of key thresholds in the DEIS classification algorithm. Before rolling out such a system, accurate data on the level of disadvantage of students who are (and are not) likely to be targeted should be analysed.

Moreover, it is important to know the level of socio-economic disadvantage among those who are and are not addressed by the DEIS programme. For instance, PIRLS 2021 data indicate that approximately one fifth (19%) of students in non-DEIS schools were in the lowest socio-economic quartile (Delaney et al., 2023[50]). Therefore, it would be important to use a proxy for socio-economic background that distinguishes levels of disadvantage at a non-binary base. The HP Index (Chapter 1) data, already available to the DoE, could provide a practical solution to this challenge, although, as mentioned below, other options should also be explored. Addressing these challenges could yield several benefits. While considerable resources have been invested in analysing the differences between rural and urban settings (Weir and McAvinue, 2013[95]; Weir, Errity and McAvinue, 2015[96]), it could lead to their nuanced understanding. Research suggests that urban and rural disadvantages differ both quantitatively and qualitatively (Smyth, McCoy and Kingston, 2015[56]). While urban schools may face academic challenges, rural schools and communities often contend with socio-economic and cultural exclusion impacting students' holistic development (ibid.).

It could also provide more information on how students with a similar level of socio-economic disadvantage fare within DEIS and non-DEIS schools. For example, emerging research suggests that while overall performance gaps have decreased over time, these do not necessarily reflect improved equality. Indeed, only after interacting the DEIS status variable with a proxy for student-level socio-economic background, researchers found that the relationship between home resources for learning (a proxy for socio-economic background) and achievement has strengthened (Duggan et al., 2023[55]). This can suggest that the inequality of opportunity linked to student-level socio-economic factors has, in fact, increased over time (ibid.).

Furthermore, it could enhance analyses by focusing on various disadvantaged groups and interacting background characteristics with socio-economic status at the student level. For instance, while the DoE and other departments place a great emphasis on Traveller and Roma students through specialised strategies (Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 2017[97]) and other publications (see, e.g. Department of Education (2023[98])), the OECD review team heard that there is a significant gap in understanding the experiences and challenges of Traveller and Roma students. For example, despite 71.9% and 55.0% of Traveller and Roma primary and post-primary students enrolled in DEIS schools (Department of Education, 2023[99]), there has been no systematic assessment of their educational outcomes compared to other ethnic groups when considering socio-economic background. This can hinder the ability to formulate targeted policies and interventions to address their needs.

There are objective limitations in working with individual data on ethnic and cultural background, such as the fact that, in 2016/17, for instance, almost a third of students in primary schools did not provide their ethnic and cultural background information (Tickner, 2017[100]). Such a high non-disclosure rate can significantly impact the quality of the analyses and conclusions based on the data. Nevertheless, working

with a broader dataset focusing on the socio-economic background of Traveller and Roma students in DEIS and non-DEIS schools could provide critical insights into the factors influencing their educational trajectories. This could contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the educational landscape for these student populations, facilitating the development of more effective and equitable education policies (OECD, 2023[3]).

Another advantage of accessing student-level data on socio-economic background is a better sampling procedure of DEIS schools in PISA. Differences in the identification system used for DEIS since 2017 (the HP index) and the socio-economic indicator used for sampling in PISA (medical card status holders), may lead to some potential difficulties in using PISA data for monitoring outcomes in DEIS schools over time (Gilleece et al., 2020[61]). Some developments are already planned. For instance, the OECD review team learned that the ERC intends to examine the possibility of using HP Index data at the student level for analysis in PIRLS 2026, and the HP Index might also be used for sampling of PISA 2025 schools.

Strengthen inter-departmental discussions to broaden the pool of student background characteristics

While the HP Index could provide a practical short-term solution for getting a proxy for socio-economic background, it has several disadvantages. It is tied to Small Areas (see Chapter 1) rather than individual students/households. The HP Index aims to identify geographic areas of disadvantage and affluence, not individual-level disadvantage. Moreover, the HP Index is not a measure of poverty, although poverty and deprivation are closely correlated. As such, it does not distinguish between current poverty and the cumulative effects of persistent poverty over a child's life, even though cumulative effects of poverty are associated with more detrimental educational outcomes (Chaudry and Wimer, 2016[101]). Furthermore, an analysis of the HP Index's effectiveness using PISA 2018 and administrative data revealed that the HP Index "represents a reasonable option for use in the DEIS identification process" and provides "a reasonable approximation of the school socio-economic context" (Gilleece and McHugh, 2022, pp. 19-20[102]). However, in a limited number of cases, it can also lead to the misclassification of schools based on their socio-economic status, and has a lower predicting power in regard to reading achievement compared to some selected alternative measures (Gilleece and McHugh, 2022[102]).[2]

Merging datasets could thus broaden the understanding of currently non-observed aspects of socio-economic disadvantage. For instance, combining and analysing other administrative sources with currently used databases (e.g. the HP Index), such as income data and social protection data, could provide a richer understanding of socio-economic contexts, and the complexity of the multifaceted challenges associated with educational disadvantage. It could improve the understanding of other dimensions of poverty and social inclusion, such as mental health needs and the role of grandparents in childcare (Downes, Pike and Murphy, 2020[103]). Chapter 3 also elaborates that the target effectiveness and efficiency of the DEIS programme could be improved by including additional dimensions of social disadvantage (e.g. psychological and socio-emotional well-being, cultural barriers and immigrant background).

Furthermore, access to other databases could lead to a quicker understanding of changing social and economic situations in particular areas. The HP Index's reliance on census data has been welcomed as a move towards more objective and transparent criteria for determining which schools should be part of the DEIS programme. However, reliance on the census creates a five-year update cycle, and data from the census are available only several months after they are collected. Thus, the information may not capture rapid changes in certain areas. This poses a risk of overlooking emerging challenges. Having access to proxies of socio-economic background that are more responsive to societal and labour market changes, such as unemployment rates, income/poverty rates, etc., and at the same time are not dependent on the census, could provide a way to respond to challenges faced by schools inside or outside of the DEIS programme in a more reactive manner.

In the longer term, it is, therefore, important to engage in inter-departmental discussions to access a wider pool of variables that proxy for socio-economic status outside of those already established and used at the DoE. To this end, utilising other administrative databases could enhance the comprehensiveness of the socio-economic proxy (Box 6.1). Such combined datasets do not necessarily need to be used to refine the DEIS identification model; they could be used for more general monitoring purposes of the DoE (and other departments). Indeed, changing the DEIS identification approach to react to every demographic change (and potentially temporary changes) might risk changing the programme's focus to tackle concentrated educational disadvantage, which might require a more extended time period.

Box 6.1. Combined administrative datasets

The Netherlands Cohort Study on Education

The *Nationaal Cohortonderzoek Onderwijs* (Netherlands Cohort Study on Education) is a longitudinal research initiative utilising register data on student track placement in primary and secondary education. The dataset is based at Statistics Netherlands, combined with other variables from other administrative registers. The first pillar explores students' educational pathways, incorporating rich background information including age, gender, country of origin, parent's marital status, household information, socio-economic background of students and their parents, and other regional variables. The second pillar provides school-level data from the Dutch Ministry of Education and the Dutch Inspectorate of Education, encompassing school size, urbanisation level and school denomination. The third pillar involves microdata on student performance obtained from standardised assessments, offering insights into students' progress in reading, spelling and mathematics between the ages of 8 and 12. Apart from research purposes, the database is also used to inform schools and school boards, among others, about students' socio-economic situation, performance and outcomes after they leave school.

Microdata from individual registers in Sweden

Statistics Sweden maintains administrative data in the country. Each Swedish resident is assigned a unique and permanent identification number at birth or point of immigration, which is recorded in each administrative database. Currently, individual registers in Sweden cover the labour market, population statistics (e.g. biological and adoptive links between persons), household finances and expenditures, income and taxation data, living conditions, electoral participation, and education and training data. Subject to approval and costs, many of these registers can be combined using a unique identification number. In education, one can connect, for instance, education results and outcomes with socio-economic background (e.g. based on tax and income, unemployment levels of parents/households) and study pathways.

Source: Research Centre for Education and the Labour Market (n.d.[104]), The Netherlands Cohort Study on Education, https://www.roa.nl/research/research-projects/netherlands-cohort-study-education (accessed on 22 November 2023) and Statistics Sweden (n.d.[105]), Mikrodata från individregister [Microdata from individual registers], https://www.scb.se/vara-tjanster/bestall-data-och-statistik/bestalla-mikrodata/vilka-mikrodata-finns/individregister/ (accessed on 22 November 2023).

That said, the DoE has already examined various data sources and methodologies to capture socio-economic disadvantage better (Department of Education, 2022[106]). Thanks to these considerations, the DEIS identification model was refined to consider Traveller and Roma students, students residing in International Protection Accommodation Services centres, Emergency Orientation and Reception Centres, and those experiencing homelessness (Chapter 1). The DoE also examined the impact of crime and the needs of students for whom English is an additional language as additional data for inclusion in the DEIS identification model (ibid.).

Improve monitoring by utilising standardised assessments

Improving monitoring by utilising standardised assessments can yield several benefits. First, unlike international assessments operating on fixed timelines, national tests can be administered on more flexible schedules (Gilleece et al., 2020[61]). Second, national assessments enable benchmarking against national standards. This approach provides a valuable complement to international large-scale assessments, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of, e.g. DEIS achievement concerning national benchmarks. Standardised assessments are suitable for benchmarking the achievements of DEIS schools with national norms, given that national standardised assessments are normed to the Irish population (ibid.).

Indeed, the policy focus, as exemplified by, for example, DEIS targets in the "National Strategy: Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life 2011-2020" (Department of Education and Skills, 2017[6]), has been on narrowing the achievement gap between DEIS and non-DEIS schools. However, given the broader contextual and socio-economic context, closing the overall DEIS achievement gap would be an "extremely ambitious agenda as it would mean reducing overall differences in educational outcomes between social class groups within and between schools" (Smyth, McCoy and Kingston, 2015, p. 76[56]). Aiming to reduce the adverse effects of the concentration of disadvantage in schools might be a more reasonable goal (Smyth, McCoy and Kingston, 2015[56]). That could require, for instance, changing the targets for specific socio-economic groups within schools and, as such, large-scale data that would allow for robust monitoring over time. Currently, this cannot be facilitated with international large-scale assessments (e.g. fluctuations in the number of DEIS schools over cycles) and can only partially be taken on board with national sample-based large-scale assessments (e.g. DEIS Rural schools are often not part of the samples).

Standardised assessments can also help to measure effectiveness. There are many ways to measure school and system effectiveness. One quantitative approach is through value-added modelling, the statistical technique used to assess the impact of a school (or teacher) on students' academic progress over time. It aims to isolate the contribution of the educational environment by analysing changes in students' achievement scores over time while accounting for factors such as prior performance, demographics and other contextual influences. Thus, value-added approaches try to isolate the school's contribution to student learning from other factors associated with student learning, such as students' socio-economic background (OECD, 2008[107]). Education systems often adopt value-added to devise a more realistic measure of a school's performance and ignore factors that are more or less beyond the school's control, such as differences in student composition or "random noise" (ibid.). Value-added models can also be used to focus attention on particular groups of students that are found to be low- or high-performing. Value-added scores do not necessarily need to be featured in league tables (after all, Ireland does not publish results from standardised assessments either), and they can be helpful for the internal and external evaluation of schools (Box 6.2).

> ### Box 6.2. The use of value-added measures in England (United Kingdom)
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> In England (United Kingdom), value-added scores (Progress 8) and other performance data and inspection reports are summarised for schools, local authorities, inspectors, dioceses, academy trusts and governors in the Analyse School Performance portal. It enables schools to analyse performance data in greater depth as part of the self-evaluation process, provides support with teaching and learning, and is the portal for inspectors to learn about school performance before an inspection visit. This interactive software enables schools and school inspectors to analyse the value-added information to, for example, identify the value-added scores of students in particular subjects, at specific year levels and of specific student groups (e.g. socio-economically disadvantaged). Moreover, it provides users with the distribution of student value-added scores as well as other features. It can help users better understand where the school is successful and where improvement is needed.
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> Source: Ofsted (2023[108]), School inspection data summary report (IDSR) guide, https://www.gov.uk/guidance/school-inspection-data-summary-report-idsr-guide (accessed on 27 November 2023).

Value-added models are not without challenges. Critics argue that the overreliance on standardised testing narrows the educational focus, neglecting critical aspects of student development and creating incentives for "teaching to the test" (Rubin, Stuart and Zanutto, 2004[109]). They can also be sensitive to variations in test difficulty, small sample sizes and year-to-year variability, leading to unpredictable changes in evaluations (Everson, 2016[110]). In Ireland, some consideration has been given to the use of value-added models, with limitations noted in regard to the availability of data and other issues (Gilleece, 2014[111]; Sloane, Oloff-Lewis and Kim, 2013[112]). Nevertheless, value-added modelling was implemented on a sample of post-primary schools (Doris, O'Neill and Sweetman, 2022[113]). It was found that while there was a considerable overlap in the ranking of schools based on raw performance scores and their value-added, some schools would move significantly in the overall ranking (ibid.). Moreover, while overrepresented among the highest-performing schools, fee-paying schools did not perform equally well when considering their value-added (ibid.).

Using assessment data could also shed more light on students' experiences progressing from DEIS primary to non-DEIS post-primary schools. The OECD review team learned that some transitions between DEIS primary and non-DEIS post-primary schools can present complex challenges for students and their families (particularly as they often lose access to an HSCL Coordinator). The discontinuity in support, such as removing HSCL Coordinators during progression, can have significant implications for families, leaving them without a vital source of assistance. Large-scale longitudinal data could focus on these critical transitions, provide valuable insights into challenges faced by students in different school contexts, and inform the development of targeted policies to support smoother transitions and mitigate potential disruptions.

Finally, access to longitudinal datasets with assessment data could stimulate research into the effects of the DEIS label on students and teachers. Two potential forces can influence parental enrolment decisions in DEIS schools. On the one hand, given the increased intensity of resources, it can be an attractive option, particularly for parents with children with more complex needs. On the other hand, the label can have a stigma attached to it. The perceived challenges and negative connotations can influence parental decisions and teachers' willingness to work in such schools. Indeed, qualitative research with a small sample of principals suggests that there is a "misunderstanding in society about what it means to be a DEIS school" (Barry et al., 2022, p. 9[67]). During the OECD review visit, some stakeholders suggested that DEIS is now being viewed mostly positively by parents. Other stakeholders mentioned that some DEIS schools have substantial challenges recruiting staff, which could affect student performance. Other concrete evidence of the consequences of this DEIS labelling is not available. Access to comprehensive data could shed

more light on the evolving nature of the DEIS label's impact, examining enrolment trends and performance development in DEIS and non-DEIS schools. These research proposals should be viewed in light of the recommendation below on facilitating research that could provide information on the causal effects of the DEIS programme.

However, the use of standardised assessments in the Irish context is not without challenges. For instance, in primary schools, the DoE would need to address the fact that schools are free to choose providers of standardised testing, which may not be comparable (Gilleece and Clerkin, 2024[89]). The scale and scope of this issue need to be explored further to evaluate to what extent data are incomparable and heterogeneous. Furthermore, data from standardised assessments in primary education are not returned to the DoE at the individual level, making value-added modelling impossible in the standard sense (should this practice be preserved).

Moreover, while quantitative analyses can provide valuable insights into school performance, a balanced approach, incorporating qualitative sources, such as external evaluations and school self-evaluations, is needed, to describe a comprehensive picture (Gilleece, 2014[111]; OECD, 2013[2]). At the same time, however, quantifying errors associated with qualitative judgments and the potential subjectivity of such evaluations cannot be done in qualitative approaches (Gilleece, 2014[111]). Thus, a better use of administrative data, complemented by qualitative insights, can shed light on nuances and idiosyncrasies in the school system, facilitating a more holistic understanding of achievement differences between schools.

Promote research that could provide more information on the causal effects of the DEIS programme

Considerable work has been done in Ireland in developing practical guidelines to support high-quality evaluation (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2019[114]; Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 2021[115]; Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 2023[116]; Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 2021[117]; Gilleece and Clerkin, 2024[89]). In line with these and by collecting more data at the individual student level and gaining access to a broader range of student and household characteristics, it might be possible for researchers to use a range of statistical techniques that can provide more information on the causal mechanisms of the DEIS programme without conducting randomised controlled trials. These include regression discontinuity, synthetic cohort matching and difference-in-differences. In Ireland, the benefits of these approaches have been identified by the ERC (Gilleece and Clerkin, 2024[89]).

Regression discontinuity design is a quasi-experimental method that exploits a discontinuity in the data by dividing the studied population into treatment and control groups based on whether participants fall above or below a specified threshold or cut-off point (European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, 2022[90]). These cut-off points can relate to, e.g. a minimum score in an examination that allows progression to the next educational level, or a score that determines participation in a programme. The underlying assumption is that individuals just above or below the threshold are similar, allowing for attributing the observed differences in outcomes to the effect of the programme under examination (Lee and Lemieux, 2010[118]). Another assumption is that individuals do not have control over whether they participate in the programme. The regression discontinuity approach assesses the programme's effect by comparing the performance of the target group (just above the threshold) with that of the control group (just below the threshold). It can estimate the average treatment effect on the treated (Box 6.3). However, a limitation of this methodology is that the programme's impact can only be attributed to those just above and below the cut-off point, preventing a comprehensive assessment of the overall effect on all participants (ibid.). Given that the DEIS programme has a specific school-level cut-off point for new entrants to the programme, this technique could be explored as one that could estimate the programme's effects on school outcomes. Indeed, Gilleece, Flannery and Clerkin

(Forthcoming[119]) aim to examine schools with similar levels of socio-economic disadvantage and compare those that received additional supports under the DEIS programme to those that did not using regression discontinuity. The authors plan to measure the impacts of the DEIS programme on post-primary school-average Junior Certificate achievement and retention outcomes from 2007 to 2016 (ibid.).

Box 6.3. Regression discontinuity to estimate returns to education quality for low-skilled students

Canaan and Mouganie focused on understanding the labour market returns to higher education quality for low-skilled students in France. They used a regression discontinuity design to compare students who had marginally passed and failed the French upper secondary exit exam (*baccalauréat général*) on the first attempt. They exploited the natural threshold (the passing score of 10 points), allowing for a quasi-experimental comparison of students with similar scores just below and above the cut-off but differing access to higher education institutions.

The authors recognised potential concerns with the regression discontinuity methodology. One is the possible manipulation of scores by students around the threshold. However, this is improbable given that the exam is in an essay format, making it unlikely for students to control their grades. Another concern is for graders and administrators to sort students below or above the threshold. However, given that the exams are anonymised, it is implausible for initial test scores to be strategically manipulated. The researchers also conducted several statistical robustness checks.

Students who had marginally passed the exam were more likely to enrol in science, technology, engineering and mathematics fields, and attend higher education institutions with better peer quality without affecting the quantity of education pursued. The findings also indicate a 12.5% increase in earnings for these students at ages 27 and 29, with no significant effect on employment rates. The study concludes that access to higher-quality post-secondary education significantly raises earnings for low-skilled students.

Source: Canaan and Mouganie (2018[120]), Returns to Education Quality for Low-Skilled Students: Evidence from a Discontinuity, http://dx.doi.org/10.1086/694468.

Synthetic cohort matching is a method to estimate causal effects by creating a comparison group that resembles the treatment group in observed characteristics. For instance, each student who is part of a programme under evaluation (or attends a school that is part of a programme) is matched, based on observable characteristics such as performance, socio-economic background, demographics, etc., to a counterpart in the data who is not part of the programme ("synthetic control group") (Box 6.4). The central assumption of this method is that the matched students are indistinguishably similar, not only based on the observable but also on unobservable characteristics (assumed to be highly correlated with the observables). These can include motivation in studying, talent and skills that are rarely available (European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, 2022[90]). If the DoE adopts some of the policy recommendations above, namely broadening the pool of administrative data and getting access to a wide range of observable characteristics of students, there may be merit in considering how this technique could be used to estimate the effects of the DEIS programme on student outcomes.

Box 6.4. Synthetic cohort matching to estimate engagement between online and face-to-face learners

Paulsen and McCormick used cohort matching to compare student engagement levels of online learners, face-to-face learners and dual-mode learners who took online and face-to-face courses in US higher education in 2015. They matched students based on their observable characteristics, such as age, gender, race, study field and enrolment status. By matching students who are similar on these characteristics, the authors aimed to isolate the effect of modality on student engagement and reduce the bias caused by the differences in the student populations. The results suggest that online learning for those particular students did not have a negative impact on most aspects of student engagement, except for collaborative learning and interaction with faculty. However, contrary to studies that did not use cohort matching techniques, they also found that the differences in supportive environment and learning strategies between online and face-to-face learners were mainly due to the different characteristics of the two groups, such as age, work and family responsibilities.

Source: Paulsen and McCormick (2020[121]), Reassessing Disparities in Online Learner Student Engagement in Higher Education, https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X19898690.

Finally, the **difference-in-differences** (DID) method involves selecting two groups or areas, a treated and a control group, and comparing their outcomes before and after a programme, practice or policy implementation (Box 6.5). The standard key assumption for the DID method is the common trend assumption, positing that the treated and control groups would have evolved similarly without the intervention (programme, practice or policy). The DID approach then compares the pre- and post-treatment levels of an outcome variable in the two groups, allowing for an assessment of the programme's overall impact (European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, 2022[90]). Compared to regression discontinuity, DID assesses the overall impact of treatment and not just local effects. DID can also be combined with synthetic cohort matching if researchers can access a wide range of panel data (Arkhangelsky et al., 2021[122]). Indeed, combining DID and synthetic cohort matching could be a feasible methodology for getting closer to the causal mechanisms behind the DEIS programme, assuming that the necessary assumptions are met and the relevant data are available, although, as previously noted, there are some limitations with data currently accessible in Ireland which may restrict analytical opportunities.

> **Box 6.5. Difference-in-differences to estimate the effectiveness of modular education on early school leaving rates**
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> Mazrekaj and De Witte evaluated the effectiveness of modular education on early school leaving rates in the Flemish Community of Belgium using a difference-in-differences methodology. Modular education is a system where conventional courses are divided into smaller modules. The researchers use a difference-in-differences framework with diverse adoption dates per school to explain a policy change that introduced modular education for only some study programmes. The results indicate that modular education reduced early school leaving rates in vocational education and training by 2.5 percentage points, with the most substantial effects observed among students with an immigrant background. Furthermore, students enrolled in modular education were more likely to be employed and earn higher wages.
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> Source: Mazrekaj and De Witte (2019[123]), The effect of modular education on school dropout, https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3569.

Ensuring the quality and transparency of evaluation processes requires a multifaceted approach, combining quantitative and qualitative methodologies. As mentioned above, this is one of the strengths of the education system and should be preserved. While quantitative evaluations provide numerical insights, qualitative evaluations are essential for a comprehensive understanding of policy contexts, aiding in identifying aspects to be measured and evaluated. Moreover, qualitative approaches enable the analysis of policy implementation processes, shedding light on the roles of various actors, and contributing to a nuanced understanding of why certain policies are successful or supported in specific contexts (European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, 2022[90]). Thus, integrating diverse evaluation and assessment instruments, encompassing quantitative and qualitative methods, is necessary to trace pathways to quality and training, offering policy makers and education institutions valuable and meaningful insights (ibid.).

Strengthen the use of data at the school level

Strengthening the use of data at the school level is paramount for informed decision making and effective policy implementation. The analysis of baseline data, including input from teachers, parents and students, along with formative and summative assessments, plays a crucial role in setting measurable targets and identifying expected outcomes for students and the school. In Ireland, despite the emphasis on data utilisation through the DEIS action planning process, some schools still face challenges in analysing this information and formulating SMART targets that are both meaningful and realistic within their specific contexts (Department of Education, 2022[78]; Department of Education, 2022[38]). Setting SMART targets and understanding the underlying data remain particularly challenging for over a third of inspected DEIS schools, indicating a need for further support and guidance (ibid.).

The challenges persist due to uncertainties in regard to the use and analysis of data, and the monitoring and evaluation of the targets set. Schools require additional guidance, particularly from *Oide*, to enhance their capacity in these aspects (Department of Education, 2022[78]). Professional development activities in this area should be highly applicable, and ideally, participants should use data that are regularly available to them. Moreover, working in teams with other school staff members is a promising strategy for implementing data use in schools (Schildkamp et al., 2019[124]). To this end, the professional development activities could encourage team participation (Box 6.6).

Box 6.6. Practitioner data use in schools: workshop toolkit in the United States

The Practitioner Data Use Workshop is a targeted toolkit designed by the National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance (US Department of Education) to enhance educators' capabilities in collaborative, data-driven inquiry and instructional decision making. The workshop introduces participants to the fundamental concept and process of the data inquiry cycle, facilitating hands-on practice. The toolkit offers a comprehensive resource for each step of the data inquiry cycle, providing activities, materials and critical points for each workshop segment.

A critical aspect of the workshop's design is the recommendation for participants to attend in school teams. This collaborative approach fosters a supportive network of practitioners using data to inform instruction. The workshop can be adapted to accommodate teams within a single school, teams from multiple schools within a region, or teams from various schools across numerous areas. Teams are encouraged to bring their datasets, including student performance on standardised assessments, disaggregated by domains and other relevant metrics showing changes over time.

The learning goals of the workshop are comprehensive, aiming for participants to become familiar with an inquiry framework for interpreting data, engage in a protocol to analyse data, identify root causes for student learning challenges, and develop learning goals and action plans. Participants are expected to leave the workshop with a specific data plan and a process applicable to their educational contexts.

Source: Bocala et al. (2014[125]), Practitioner Data Use in Schools: Workshop Toolkit, https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/rel/regions/northeast/pdf/REL_2015043.pdf (accessed on 22 November 2023).

Improving the clarity on the interface between school self-evaluation and DEIS action planning was also identified as essential for facilitating school improvement (Department of Education, 2022[78]). A comprehensive approach is needed to address these challenges, involving on-going professional development for teachers and principals, clear guidance on setting SMART targets, and improved coordination between self-evaluation and action-planning processes. Quality of leadership is often tied to the principals' use of data. Indeed, action planning for improvement, analysis of baseline data and information available to the school, including the views and perspectives of the teachers, parents and students, setting targets, whole-school implementation, and regular monitoring and reviewing actions were identified as key indicators of highly effective leadership in DEIS schools by the Inspectorate (ibid.).

Improving the use of data in schools should not only involve training for current and prospective principals (as is now offered by *Oide*) but also external supports provided at a higher level to multiple schools. Supporting the digital transformation of schools needs to involve a careful reflection on the types of resources and services that are best provided to schools at scale or by qualified external staff (OECD, 2023[126]). Ireland's "Digital Strategy for Schools to 2027" already identified some ways to strengthen digital capacity around schools by, e.g. proposing regional panels of approved providers to offer technical support and advice to schools as well as a longer-term perspective of providing centralised high-quality technical and maintenance support to schools (Department of Education, 2022[10]). This vital step in the right direction should be accompanied by a reflection on how the regional or central level can support schools in accessing and analysing data to help them in their self-evaluation and improvement planning process.

Some OECD countries have established local centres of expertise or maintain centrally coordinated networks of experts who can be dispatched to build capacity at the local level and support schools with needs related to the use of digital resources or the analysis of data (Box 6.7). Similar structures could provide a means in Ireland to provide schools with robust analyses of their assessments and other data based on their needs, while ensuring the protection of privacy and maintenance of analytical rigour.

Box 6.7. Strengthening schools' digital capacity through regional and local expertise in France

A network of local digital advisors in France has supported local authorities in implementing digital education technologies since 2013. The advisors provide support on digital matters to the rectors of France's 30 education academies (or administrative districts), liaise with local authorities and companies, lead initiatives, and facilitate networks around the uses of digital tools in education. The advisors also develop training programmes and mobilise knowledge for teachers to become more active in the use of digital tools for learning. Each academy has at least one digital education advisor, with most having less than 15, totalling several hundred advisors. In co-operation with the Directorate for Digital Education, this strong network of skilled experts could be mobilised to prepare and oversee the transition to remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic (OECD, 2023[126]; Vincent-Lancrin, Cobo Romaní and Reimers, 2022[127]).

Source: Adapted from OECD (2023[126]), Shaping Digital Education: Enabling Factors for Quality, Equity and Efficiency, https://doi.org/10.1787/bac4dc9f-en.

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Notes

[1] Categories align with those established by the Central Statistics Office (CSO) and derive from the Census of Population since 2011 (Department of Education, 2024[14]). The categories encompass White Irish, Irish Traveller, Roma, Black or Black Irish (African or other Black background), Asian or Asian Irish (Chinese or other Asian background), and an "Other" category, including mixed backgrounds.

[2] HP Index data are based on students across all grades in the participating schools. In contrast, measures from PISA were derived only from those students participating in PISA, i.e. those aged 15 years at the time of assessment. The authors acknowledge that the lack of data on socio-economic background (PISA index of economic, social and cultural status) for students across all grades is one limitation of this measure.

Annex A. The OECD Education for Inclusive Societies project

The Education for Inclusive Societies project seeks to help governments and relevant stakeholders achieve more equitable and inclusive education systems as a pillar to create more inclusive societies. This project is a follow-up to and draws on the findings of the previous Strength through Diversity project (2017-2022), which examined how best to support the success of learners from diverse backgrounds as well as relevant knowledge from across the OECD. The main findings of the Strength through Diversity project can be found in two synthesis reports (OECD, 2019[1]; OECD, 2023[2]).

The Education for Inclusive Societies project is designed to respond to the increasing diversity that characterises education systems and the growing interest in designing and implementing inclusive educational policies at national and international levels. The two overarching policy questions for the project are: (1) How can education systems effectively support the learning and well-being needs of all learners throughout life, especially the most vulnerable? and (2) How can equity in education foster the development of more inclusive societies?

The project focuses on six dimensions of diversity: migration-induced diversity; ethnic groups, national minorities and Indigenous peoples; special education needs; gender; gender identity and sexual orientation; and giftedness, as well as two overarching dimensions: socio-economic background and geographical location. It also analyses the intersections between the different dimensions of diversity (see Figure A.1).

The project differentiates between equity and inclusion in education, while recognising that those are intimately related concepts. Equitable education systems are those that ensure the achievement of educational potential is not the result of personal and social circumstances, including factors such as gender, ethnic origin, immigrant status, special education needs and giftedness. This assumes the role of education systems in achieving equity is to provide equality of opportunity so that individuals reach their educational potential. Inclusive education, while closely linked to equity, aims to strengthen the capacity of school systems to reach out to all students by responding to the diversity of their needs and ultimately guaranteeing self-worth and a sense of belonging. It means that education systems must be able to implement mechanisms that foster a proper environment for the well-being of these students, an environment that allows them to express their full potential. It should make them feel safe, achieve the best performance possible and, when applicable, feel in accordance with their own cultural values and representations while being enrolled in mainstream schools. It is the role of policy makers and educators to address these challenges together, guaranteeing the educational achievement of all while strengthening intercultural understanding and social justice.

The project examines five key policy areas shaping equitable and inclusive education. The design of the overall, systemic framework for governing equity and inclusion (governance), the use of resources to support equity and inclusion effectively (resourcing), the ability to build capacity for all stakeholders to support equity and inclusion (capacity building), the provision of effective interventions by educational institutions to support equity and inclusion (educational interventions), and the monitoring and evaluation of processes and outcomes to support equity and inclusion in and through education (monitoring and evaluation).

Moreover, the project considers how the key policy areas influence individual and societal outcomes (socio-political, economic and well-being) and, in combination with other policy areas (e.g. health, social and welfare), influence the development of inclusive societies. An inclusive society is one where all individuals, regardless of their backgrounds, identities or circumstances, are treated fairly and have equal access to opportunities, resources and rights. It values diversity, promotes respect, and fosters a sense of belonging and participation among all members. In an inclusive society, discrimination, prejudice and exclusion are actively addressed and overcome to ensure that everyone can fully contribute to and benefit from social, economic and political life.

Figure A.1. Dimensions of diversity and overarching factors
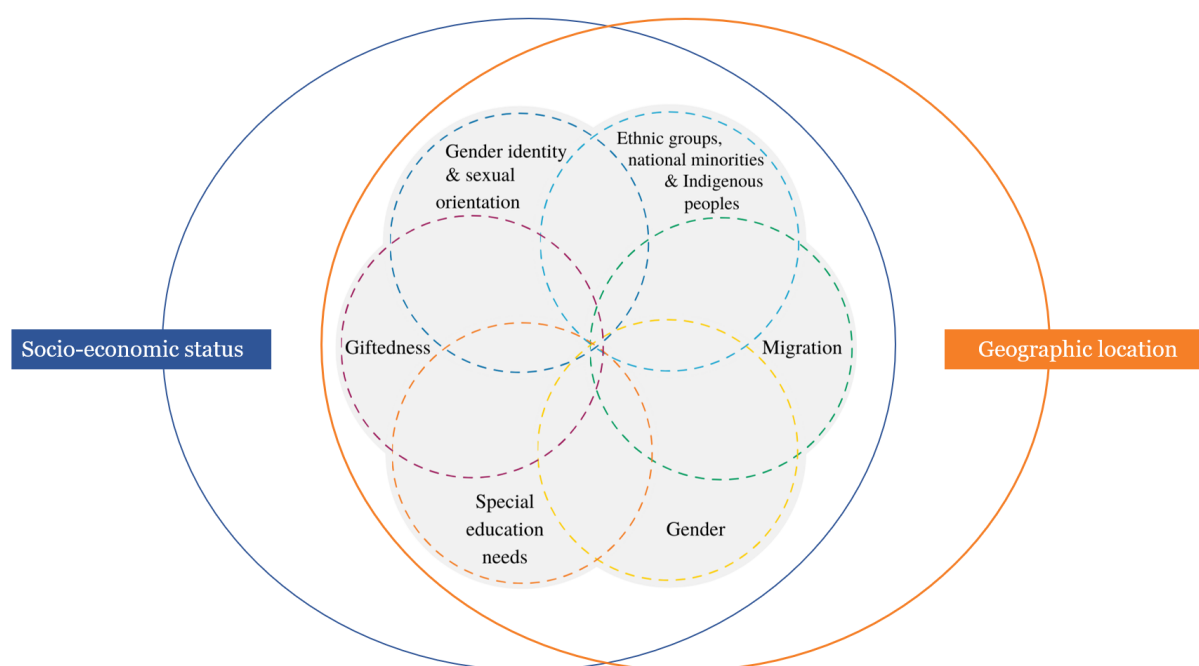
Source: Cerna et al. (2021[3]), Promoting inclusive education for diverse societies: A conceptual framework, Figure 2.3., https://dx.doi.org/10.1787/94ab68c6-en.

Ensuring that education systems are able to effectively meet the needs of all learners is key to a strong and inclusive recovery and the development of healthy societies. Supporting all learners to acquire strong skills throughout life will not only provide them with the opportunity to succeed in a rapidly changing world, but also guarantee that every person has the chance to develop a sense of belonging, self-worth, and to participate fully in society. Additionally, a focus on inclusion can counteract stigma, stereotyping, discrimination and alienation in educational institutions and societies more broadly. Promoting inclusion in education can improve not only the academic outcomes of the most vulnerable learners, but in turn also their long-term labour market, economic, health and well-being outcomes. The cumulative effect of these individual improvements can translate into societal gains, through increased fiscal contributions and labour productivity, increased gross domestic product and lower welfare costs, along with increased social participation, trust, etc.

The project seeks to make the most of the OECD's greatest strengths – providing a setting where governments can compare policy experiences, seek answers to common problems, and identify and share good practices. It brings together lessons from all countries in a series of thematic Policy Fora and Meetings of Country Representatives.

Annex B. Composition of the review team

Lucie Cerna is Senior Analyst and Project Leader, and an Associate Research Fellow at the Centre for Liberal Arts and Social Sciences, Nanyang Technological University Singapore. At the OECD, she has worked on a variety of education topics, including the governance of education, trust, national skills strategies and the Education for Inclusive Societies project. Prior to coming to the OECD, she was a Lecturer in Politics at the University of Oxford, and an Assistant Professor in Global Challenges (Political Economy) at Leiden University. Lucie has published on migration, education and skills issues. She holds a DPhil from the University of Oxford.

Luka Boeskens is a Policy Analyst. At the OECD, Luka has contributed to country review reports, conducted analyses on the funding of private education and coordinated thematic work on the organisation of school facilities, sectors and programmes. He has co-authored The Funding of School Education (2017), Responsive School Systems (2018) and Working and Learning Together (2019) reports. Luka holds a MSc in Sociology and a BA in Philosophy, Politics and Economics from the University of Oxford and was a visiting student at Dartmouth College.

Cecilia Mezzanotte is a Policy Analyst. At the OECD, she has focused on the rationale of inclusive education, the measurement of inclusion in education and in particular on the inclusion of students with special education needs. She contributed to country review reports and developed analyses in the field of equity and inclusion. Cecilia holds a Bachelor's degree in International Economics and Management and a Master's Degree in Economics and Management of Government and International Organizations from Bocconi University.

Samo Varsik is a Policy Analyst. Prior to joining the OECD, Samo worked as a senior analyst at the Education Policy Institute, an analytical unit under the Ministry of Education of the Slovak Republic, where he specialised in inclusive education policies, early childhood education and care, out-migration and quantitative analyses in an educational context. Samo was born in Slovakia and studied economics in Edinburgh and London.

Ides Nicaise is Professor Emeritus at KU Leuven, Belgium. He has a background in economics and works as a senior research manager at HIVA (Research Institute for Work and Society). He has specialised in social policy, more precisely the relationships between education, labour market policy and social inclusion. At the Department of Education Sciences of his University, he taught the subjects "economics of education", "lifelong learning and equal opportunities" and "education and society". Besides his professional activities, he is chairing the Belgian Combat Poverty Service.

Annex C. Visit programme

The review team identified stakeholder groups with whom to meet via consultation with the national coordination team, soliciting the input from various stakeholders and a desk review of key educational institutions in Ireland. The review team conducted a preliminary visit and a main visit.

The preliminary visit was undertaken online. It consisted of approximately 20 interviews with representatives from almost 30 education partners, representative groups/non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and academics. A representative from the European Commission (co-funding the review) joined some of the interviews. The preliminary visit informed the plans for the main visit. It consisted of five main aims:

- Discuss the key education issues that should be addressed by the review team;
- Identify the major stakeholder groups and key individuals that the review team should meet;
- Identify institutions and organisations that the review team should consult;
- Identify schools that the review team should see during the main review visit; and
- Discuss logistical issues and map out a broad schedule for the main review visit.

The interviews were conducted between 27 June and 26 July 2023. Table C.1 outlines further details of the visit and schedule.

Table C.1. Preliminary visit schedule

Date and time	Education partner, representative group, NGO, academia
27 June 2023	
16:30-17:30	Teachers' Union of Ireland
28 June	
14:30-15:30	Educate Together Joint Managerial Body
16:00-17:00	Irish Second Level Student's Union
29 June	
10:30-11:30	Economic and Social Research Institute
16:00-17:00	Pavee Point Travellers Centre Irish Traveller Movement National Traveller Women's Forum
30 June	
10:00-11:00	Irish National Teachers' Organisation Dublin City University, Institute of Education
3 July	
10:30-11:30	National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals
14:30-15:30	Education and Training Boards Ireland
4 July	
10:00-11:00	Board of Education - Church of Ireland
11:15-12:15	Social Justice Ireland
16:00-17:00	Educational Research Centre Economic and Social Research Institute

Date and time	Education partner, representative group, NGO, academia
7 July	
10:30-11:30	Muslim Primary Education Board
	Association of Community and Comprehensive Schools
	National Association of Boards of Management in Special Education
16:00-17:00	Barnardos
	Children's Rights Alliance
	University of Galway, School of Education
19 July	
15:00-16:00	Irish Primary Principals' Network
	St Vincent de Paul
20 July	
15:00-16:00	Association of Secondary Teachers in Ireland
	University College Dublin, School of Education
26 July	
15:00-16:00	National Parents Council

The main visit, undertaken between 18 and 22 September 2023, consisted of 11 interviews with stakeholders from the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, Department of Education, Department of Education's Inspectorate, Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, Department of Social Protection, Department of the Taoiseach, National Educational Psychological Service, Social Inclusion Unit of the Department of Education, and Tulsa Education Support Service. A representative from the European Commission also attended the interviews. Table C.2 outlines further details of the visit and schedule.

Furthermore, the review team, in collaboration with the Department of Education, selected six (public) schools for visit. The schools were chosen with the aim to maximise diversity in terms of their setting (e.g. urban and rural), their student body (e.g. size and socio-economic composition) and other characteristics (level of education, school performance, etc.), while taking into account constraints imposed by the main visit schedule. The criteria for the selection of public schools were the following:

- Different geographical locations (counties and rural/urban locations);
- Different school levels (primary, post-primary (Junior Cycle and Senior Cycle));
- Diverse student populations (Traveller and Roma students enrolment rates, foreign student population rates, students with special educational needs rates, and all boys/all girls/mixed schools);
- Varying retention rates/early school leaving rates/transition rates;
- Different types of DEIS schools (DEIS Urban Band 1, DEIS Urban Band 2, DEIS Rural and DEIS Post-primary);
- Different lengths of participation in the DEIS programme;
- At least one non-DEIS school;
- At least one Education Training Board school; and
- Schools that are representative of the average situation encountered in the country.

The review team met with principals, teachers, other school staff, parents and students in each school.

Table C.2. Main visit schedule

Date and time	Department/school
18 September 2023	
10:45	Meeting with the Social Inclusion Unit, Department of Education, with: • Two Principal Officers • Two Assistant Principal Officers
14:30	Meeting with the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth with: • Assistant Secretary • Principal Officer • Assistant Principal Officer
16:30	Meeting in the Department of the Taoiseach, with: • Principal Officer, Child Poverty and Wellbeing Programme Office • Principal Officer, Social Policy
19 September	
8:30	Visit to Lucan Community College (non-DEIS post-primary), County Dublin
11:00	Visit to Scoil Áine Naofa (non-DEIS primary), County Dublin
14:00	Meeting with Principal Officer, Special Education Needs Policy, Department of Education
15:00	Meeting with Chief Inspector, Department of Education Inspectorate and Assistant Chief Inspector, Department of Education
16:00	Meeting with the Tulsa Education Support Service, including: • Director • National Manager (Home School Community Liaison Scheme) • Children First and Service Development Manager • National Manager (School Completion Programme) • School Completion Programme Continuous Professional Development Manager • Integrated Services Manager • Regional Manager
20 September	
9:00	Visit to Corpus Christi Primary School, Moyross, Limerick (DEIS Urban Band 1)
12:30	Visit to Thomond Community College Moylish Park, Moylish, Co Limerick (DEIS Post-primary)
21 September	
10:00	Visit to Scoil Mhuire Pullough, Rahan, Tullamore, Co. Offaly (DEIS Rural)
14:00	Meeting with Assistant Principal Officer, School Meals Programme Office, Department of Social Protection
15:00	Meeting with Assistant Principal Officer, Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Unit, Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science
16:00	Meeting with Department of Education with: • Principal Officer, Teacher Education • Primary Teacher Education Inspector • Post-primary Teacher Education Inspector • Representative from *Oide*
22 September	
9:00	Meeting with the National Educational Psychological Service: • Director • Regional Director • Principal Officer
10:30	Visit to St David's Boy's National School, Kilmore Road, Artane, Dublin (DEIS Urban Band 2)

References

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Reviews of National Policies for Education

OECD Review of Resourcing Schools to Address Educational Disadvantage in Ireland

The "OECD Review of Resourcing Schools to Address Educational Disadvantage in Ireland" provides an independent analysis meant to support Irish authorities in identifying ways to strengthen the resources and supports provided to students at risk of educational disadvantage in both DEIS and non-DEIS schools. The report serves three purposes: i) to provide insights and advice to Irish education authorities; ii) to help other countries understand the Irish approach to equitable education; and iii) to provide input for comparative analyses of the OECD Education for Inclusive Societies project. The scope for the analysis in this report covers primary and post-primary education. The focus areas of the review in Ireland are: i) governance, ii) resourcing; iii) capacity building; iv) school-level interventions and v) monitoring and evaluation. This report will be of interest in Ireland and other countries looking to improve the equity of students at risk of educational disadvantage in their education systems.