RAISING THE ACHIEVEMENT OF ALL LEARNERS IN INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

Country Report: Ireland

IRELAND COUNTRY REPORT

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1.   What reference is made to raising achievement in national policies? How is raising achievement defined?

The Irish Department of Education and Skills 'Plan for Education 2016–19' is summarised by five high-level goals:

1. Improve the learning experience and the success of learners

2. Improve the progress of learners at risk of educational disadvantage or learners with special educational needs

3. Help those delivering education services to continuously improve

4. Build stronger bridges between education and wider community

5. Improve national planning and support services.

In each of these areas the Department aims to deliver systematic progress so as to realise its vision of being the best education and training service in Europe.

2.   What national policies specifically target raising achievement?

Inclusive education is a fundamental principle of the Irish education and training system and Ireland has measures in place to support the diverse needs of learners of all ages. Goal 2 of the Plan for Education is to improve the progress of learners at risk of educational disadvantage or learners with special educational needs. Key policies and initiatives which focus on this goal are noted below:

1. National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS)

While supporting the development of the academic, social and emotional competence of all learners, the Department's National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) prioritises its support for learners at risk of educational disadvantage and those with special educational needs.

NEPS has adopted a consultative model of service. The focus is on empowering teachers to intervene effectively with learners whose needs range from mild to severe and transient to enduring. Psychologists use a problem-solving and solution-focused consultative approach to maximise positive outcomes for these learners. NEPS encourages schools to use a continuum-based assessment and intervention process, whereby each school takes responsibility for initial assessment, educational planning and remedial intervention for learners with learning, emotional or behavioural difficulties.

2. Tackling disadvantage through Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS)

Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS), the Action Plan for Educational Inclusion, is the Department of Education and Skills' (DES) main policy initiative to tackle educational disadvantage. The Action Plan focuses on addressing the educational needs of children and young people from disadvantaged communities from pre-primary through second-level education (3–18 years). Its frame of reference is based on the definition of 'educational disadvantage' contained in the Education Act 1998: '… the impediments to education arising from social or economic disadvantage which prevent students from deriving appropriate benefit from education in schools'. It is grounded on the following principles:

- 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 his or her full educational potential for personal, social and economic reasons.

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

The Plan was established in 2005. Its key objective was to draw together the range of interventions to tackle educational disadvantage at that time and build on them, within an overarching programme to provide a more integrated and effective range of educational inclusion supports to schools. The core elements of the Plan comprised:

- a standardised system for identifying and reviewing levels of disadvantage in schools;

- a new integrated School Support Programme to bring together and build upon existing interventions for schools and school clusters/communities with a concentrated level of educational disadvantage – taking account of the differences between urban and rural disadvantage in targeting actions under the programme.

Initially 670 primary and 203 post-primary schools, representing approximately 20% of all schools, were selected for inclusion in a School Support Programme (SSP). Under this programme, schools and school clusters/communities were allocated supplementary resources and supports on a phased basis, in accordance with their level of concentration of disadvantage. Additional resources include additional staffing, funding, access to literacy and numeracy programmes and assistance with activities such as school planning. As part of the SSP, interventions such as the Home School Community Liaison Scheme and the School Completion Programme were made available to some DEIS schools and delivered by Tusla Education and Welfare services (see below).

DEIS schools are required, within their own particular context, to ensure a focus on teaching and learning wherever relevant when planning for improvement in literacy, numeracy, attendance, retention, examination attainment (post-primary schools only), progression and partnership with parents and others. DEIS schools are required to ensure that their action plans for improvement have a robust evidence base, and are clearly targeted at learners requiring specific interventions and support.

Developments and achievements from DEIS are documented in a series of evaluation reports produced by the Educational Research Centre and the DES Inspectorate. Improved attendance and retention rates have also been recorded in DES and Tusla educational welfare annual reports. While literacy and numeracy outcomes have improved in DEIS schools, achievement data shows that outcomes are still below the national norm (see further information below on discrete targets for DEIS schools under the National Strategy on Literacy and Numeracy).

A review of the DEIS programme was published in 2017. This makes a series of recommendations aimed at building on progress to date. This informed the development of a new Action Plan for Educational Inclusion which was published in early 2017.

3. Educational Welfare Services

The improvement of the school engagement, participation and retention levels of learners from disadvantaged backgrounds is prioritised through the delivery of an integrated model for educational welfare by Tusla, the Child and Family Agency. The Educational Welfare Services of Tusla operate under the Education (Welfare) Act, 2000, which emphasises the promotion of school attendance, participation and retention. Educational welfare services work collaboratively with schools and other relevant services to secure better educational outcomes for children and young people. Education Welfare Officers work with young people and their families who are experiencing difficulty with school attendance. The main priority of their work is around the welfare of children and young people and on ensuring that concerns and problems around attendance are addressed before attendance becomes a crisis issue.

4. National Strategy on Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life 2011–2020

Literacy is defined as including the capacity to read, understand and critically appreciate various forms of communication including spoken language, printed text, broadcast media and digital media.

Numeracy is not limited to the ability to use numbers to add, subtract, multiply and divide. It is defined as encompassing the ability to use mathematical understanding and skills to solve problems and meet the demands of day-to-day living in complex social settings.

Actions in the Strategy are identified across six pillars of the education system:

- Pillar 1: Enabling parents and communities to support children's literacy and numeracy development

- Pillar 2: Improving teachers' and early childhood care and education practitioners' professional practice

- Pillar 3: Building the capacity of school leadership

- Pillar 4: Improving the curriculum and the learning experience

- Pillar 5: Helping learners with additional learning needs to achieve their potential

- Pillar 6: Improving assessment and evaluation to support better learning in literacy and numeracy

An Interim Review has shown progress at the mid-way point in the Strategy.

Examples of specific actions include:

- An annual Literacy and Numeracy Forum
- Research on creative and innovative ways to support parents in their role as educators
- Prioritising the development of mathematics curricula at primary and post-primary
- Professional development, continuing to prioritise and refine its literacy and numeracy supports for teachers
- Developing further support for the transitions between educational settings, e.g. from early years settings to primary.

In order to maintain focus to 2020, targets have been revisited, in particular where achievements are already at or near the benchmark set in 2011. The Interim Review also identified a gap in achievement between schools with the highest concentration of disadvantage (DEIS urban band 1 at primary) and other schools. In order to keep focus on this cohort, a set of discrete targets have been identified in literacy and numeracy for DEIS schools, linked to the DEIS Plan 2017.

The Plan for Education commits to increase the use of ICT in teaching, learning and assessment. A key objective of this Strategy is to create a 'step-change' in the use of ICT in teaching, learning and assessment at all levels of the education and training system. This will ensure that learners are equipped with the skills to live in an increasingly digitally connected world. Actions include investment in infrastructure, including high speed broadband for primary schools, professional development for teachers and lecturers and increased technology-enhanced and blended learning opportunities.

6. Well-being in schools

At post-primary level, guidelines have been developed for supporting well-being in schools. The guidelines adopt a comprehensive, whole-school approach to mental health and well-being. They focus on the entire school community, not just individual young people with identified needs. Mental health and well-being are linked to developing a sense of connectedness to school, to enable young people to experience success and to develop their social competencies and resilience to face the challenges of everyday living.

The purpose of the guidelines is to outline how schools can progress mental health promotion work using the NEPS Continuum of Support Framework, which is based on the WHO Model for mental health promotion. The purpose is also to highlight the need for a holistic approach, as reflected in the Health Promoting Schools Framework, whereby school organisation, ethos and climate, curriculum and community links and partnerships are all interconnected.

There are also guidelines for well-being in primary schools. These emphasise that listening to the voice of the child and fostering healthy relationships with peers, teachers and school staff are essential to children's positive experience of school and their cognitive and emotional development.

Since 2000, the DES has worked in partnership with the Department of Health and the Health Service Executive to support the implementation of Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) at post-primary (junior cycle) and Relationship and Sexuality Education (RSE) at both junior and senior cycles. Health Promotion Officers and members of the SPHE Support Service collaborate on a regional basis to ensure that schools are supported in meeting the health needs of their learners. The development of a national framework for Health Promoting Schools is regarded as a positive development by the SPHE Inter-Departmental Partnership. The Health Promoting Schools concept aims to support a whole-school approach to promoting health and well-being. It strives to create an environment where positive relationships are fostered among learners, staff, parents, guardians and the wider school community. The process of working towards becoming a HPS involves attention and focus on four key areas:

- Environment

- Curriculum and Learning

- Policy and Planning

- Partnerships.

3. What information/data are collected at national level on attainment and achievement?

Information on literacy and numeracy achievement in Ireland is collected periodically through assessments of samples of learners at primary level by the Educational Research Centre in the National Assessments of English Reading and Mathematics. Information is also available from international studies (PISA, TIMMS and PIRLS) in which Ireland participates.

Standardised tests are used to measure a learner's reading and mathematical achievement and to determine their progress in those areas. Information from the tests is important given the vital role of literacy and numeracy in enabling learners to access the full curriculum. All primary schools are required to carry out standardised tests in English reading and mathematics in primary schools in second, fourth and sixth classes. Information from these tests is provided to parents. The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) has provided standard report templates to assist schools in reporting information about the progress of primary learners to parents, including information from standardised tests.

Information from standardised testing is also used by schools to inform teaching and learning. Schools must submit the aggregated data from standardised tests to the school's board of management and to the DES.

The National Strategy on Literacy and Numeracy notes that gathering evidence about how well learners are learning and using this information to improve learning are essential elements in ensuring that each learner makes good progress in developing literacy and numeracy skills. The strategy also notes that:

- This process of gathering and using assessment data should begin at the level of the individual learner. This enables the teacher to adjust instruction to suit the needs of individual learners and to inform them and their parents about the progress that they are making.

- Gathering and using assessment data also needs to take place at the level of the school. Principals, teachers and boards of management can use this information to identify how well they are providing for the literacy and numeracy needs of individual learners and groups of learners in the school and how best they can improve the learning in the school. Effective schools analyse data from standardised tests and other sources regularly and track trends over time.

- Assessment data also needs to inform national educational policy for literacy and numeracy and identify ways of improving the performance of the school system. Collection and analysis of information about learners' learning in literacy and numeracy need to be improved significantly.

4. What information/data on attainment and achievement (including the wider areas outlined above) are collected at school level?

See above

5. What information/data are used for school evaluation and quality assurance at national/local level?

School self-evaluation

School self-evaluation was formally introduced by the DES Inspectorate into the Irish school system in 2012 as a collaborative, reflective process of internal school review, focused on school improvement.

School self-evaluation further develops the school development planning process and focuses it firmly on teaching and learning. All primary and post-primary schools are required to engage in the school self-evaluation process and set out their purpose and rationale. Circulars from the DES set out how schools should implement school self-evaluation.

School self-evaluation involves reflective enquiry, leading to action planning for improvement that is informed by evidence gathered within each school's unique context. The process enables schools to use this evidence to identify meaningful and specific targets and actions for improvement that focus on teaching and learning practices. It enables them to create and implement improvement plans, to measure their progress and to identify their achievements. In their on-going engagement with school self-evaluation, schools focus on teaching and learning and use the process to implement national initiatives and to identify and work on aspects of their own teaching and learning practices which require development and improvement.

National guidelines for schools have been published by the Inspectorate. These guidelines cover:

- school self-evaluation as a process and a step-by-step approach to getting school self-evaluation started;

- a Quality Framework for Post-Primary Schools outlining domains and standards to enable schools to evaluate teaching and learning in a systematic and coherent way;

- Statements of Practice – a set of standards and statements of practice to assist schools in making judgements about the quality of teaching and learning;

- evaluation approaches and methods that schools can use to gather the evidence necessary for school self-evaluation;

- Reporting on School Self-Evaluation, with guidance to schools about recording their self-evaluation processes and school improvement plan and sharing them with parents and the wider school community.

The DES published revised 'School Self-Evaluation Guidelines' in 2016, in which standards for teaching and learning as well as for leadership and management were made available to schools. The DES also published its quality framework for primary and post-primary schools, in 'Looking at Our School 2016'.

6. Are there any specific initiatives in place to support/enable teachers and/or school leaders to raise the attainment and achievement of all learners?

The Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST)

This is the national single support service offering professional learning opportunities to teachers and school leaders in a range of pedagogical, curricular and educational areas. The aim of the PDST is to provide high quality professional development and support that empowers teachers and schools to provide the best possible education for all learners. The PDST mission is to support teachers as reflective practitioners by providing a range of professional development opportunities and support that enable teacher learning, collaboration and evidence-based practice, with an emphasis on:

- curriculum and pedagogy;

- learning and teaching methodologies;

- school improvement and school self-evaluation;

- school leadership, culture and leading learning;

- learner and teacher welfare;

- information and communications technology.

PDST encompasses a broad range of supports previously provided by a number of individual support services and programmes, which include:

- Primary Professional Development Service (PPDS)

- Second-Level Support Service (SLSS)

- Leadership Development Service (LDS)

- School Development Planning (SDP)

- Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA)

- Transition Year (TY)

- Junior Certificate Schools Programme (JCSP)

- Reading Recovery

- Maths Recovery

- An tSeirbhís Tacaíochta Dara Leibhéal don Ghaeilge (STDL Gaeilge – Second-Level Support Service for Irish)

- National Centre for Technology in Education (NCTE), now known as PDST Technology in Education

- Junior Cycle Physical Education (JCPE)

- Social Personal and Health Education (SPHE) support service.

The PDST contributes to school improvement by fostering reflective practice through the school self-evaluation process and through the on-going development of teachers and school leaders through a range of continuing professional development (CPD) models.

Amongst the priorities for the DES for the coming years is the implementation of proposals to improve literacy and numeracy in both primary and post-primary schools. Other key priorities include:

- Supporting school leadership

- School self-evaluation

- Assessment

- ICT for teaching and learning

- Inclusion

- Health and well-being

- Post-primary subjects and programmes.

These priorities inform the work of PDST and are addressed through the work of individual teams across the organisation.

In addition, since March 2017 the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) Support Service has encompassed three support services relating to special educational needs. These include:

- The Special Education Support Service (SESS)

- The National Behaviour Support Service (NBSS)
- The Visiting Teacher Service for Children who are Deaf/Hard of Hearing and Children who are Blind/Visually Impaired (VTHVI).

This new service aims to develop schools' capacity to include learners with special educational needs (SEN) and to promote a continuum of educational provision which is inclusive and responsive and includes provision of CPD and support for teachers in the area of SEN. This will enhance the quality of learning and teaching in relation to SEN provision, providing support and expertise to partner schools on issues related to behaviour. It will also support the introduction of the new model of resource teaching allocation to schools and develop capacity to meet the needs of learners with SEN.

Recognising the importance of effective leadership in schools, the DES established the Centre for School Leadership in 2015. This provides services ranging from pre-appointment training through to the induction of newly appointed principals and CPD throughout the leader's career. The Centre will also advise the DES on policy in this area.

7.   What other policies may influence levels of attainment and achievement for all learners?

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8.   Please provide a short commentary/critical reflection on the main policy challenges

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