

# Northern Ireland

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## Introduction

### Overview of Education System

Northern Ireland has a complex education structure with numerous entities involved in its management and administration.<sup>1</sup> Overall responsibility for preprimary, primary, secondary, and special education lies with the Department of Education (DE). Responsibility for further education, employment and skills programs, and higher education lies with the Department for the Economy (DfE). Northern Ireland departments are accountable to the Northern Ireland Assembly through the responsible minister. In 2017, the power sharing system of government in Northern Ireland collapsed, and until its restoration in January 2020, the Northern Ireland Assembly did not sit and there were no executive ministers. During this time, Northern Ireland departments made the decisions required to uphold good governance and protect the public interest, but major policy decisions were deferred.<sup>2</sup>

English is the language of instruction in the vast majority of schools in Northern Ireland. The Department of Education has a legal duty under the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1998 to encourage and facilitate the development of Irish-medium education. In the 2020–2021 academic year, Irish-medium schools catered to 2.9 percent of primary school students, of which the majority came from homes where English is the dominant language.<sup>3,4</sup>

DE is advised on school curricula, assessments, and qualifications by the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA), an arm’s length body. The General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland (GTCNI) is responsible for registering teachers and regulating the teaching profession (though a decision to dissolve the organization was made in December 2021). The Education Authority is responsible for ensuring that efficient and effective primary and secondary education is available and also has statutory responsibility for school improvement. Depending on the type of school, the employing authority for teachers is the Education Authority, the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools, or the individual school’s Board of Governors.

Grant-aided (publicly funded) schools differ in ownership, management, and ethos. The four main types of these schools are controlled, maintained (mostly Catholic), voluntary grammar, and grant-maintained integrated.<sup>5</sup>

All schools in Northern Ireland have a high level of autonomy. Overall responsibility for strategic matters lies with each school’s Board of Governors, with the principal responsible and

accountable for day-to-day school operations. School autonomy is counterbalanced by a system of accountability. All grant-aided schools are required to follow the Northern Ireland Curriculum for children ages 4 to 16. Schools are required to set their own targets for improvement, including targets for literacy and numeracy, and include these targets in the School Development Plan.<sup>6</sup> Schools are inspected by the Department of Education’s Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI).

Compulsory education spans 12 years from ages 4 to 16. Secondary education is provided in nongrammar and grammar schools, known collectively as postprimary schools. Almost all grammar schools use academic selection as the basis for admission.<sup>7</sup> During the 2020–2021 academic year, 43.2 percent of postprimary school students attended a grammar school.<sup>8</sup> The majority of young people continue with full-time education after age 16. Although noncompulsory, full-time education is free up to age 19 and is provided by postprimary schools and further education colleges.

Exhibit 1 shows the key stages of the 12-year compulsory education system and their corresponding levels in UNESCO’s International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED).

**Exhibit 1: Stages of the Education System in Northern Ireland**

Stage	Year	Age	ISCED Level	International Grade Equivalent
Foundation Stage	1	4	Level 1	—
	2	5	Level 1	—
Key Stage 1	3	6	Level 1	Grade 1
	4	7	Level 1	Grade 2
Key Stage 2	5	8	Level 1	Grade 3
	6	9	Level 1	Grade 4
	7	10	Level 1	Grade 5
Key Stage 3	8	11	Level 2	Grade 6
	9	12	Level 2	Grade 7
	10	13	Level 2	Grade 8
Key Stage 4	11	14	Level 3	Grade 9
	12	15	Level 3	Grade 10

Official policies that have emphasized the centrality of literacy and numeracy in the curriculum include Every School a Good School: A Policy for School Improvement and Count, Read: Succeed: A Strategy to Improve Outcomes in Literacy and Numeracy. These policies are described in the Special Reading Initiatives section.

## Use and Impact of PIRLS

Northern Ireland took part in the 2011 and 2016 PIRLS cycles. Student performance in reading remained stable from 2011 to 2016, when Northern Ireland’s consistently strong performance was welcomed by the Department of Education (DE).<sup>9</sup> DE has since commissioned further research to inform policymakers and help schools improve further.<sup>10</sup>

Data from international studies like PIRLS have provided opportunities for international benchmarking, a national measure of attainment in the absence of Key Stage Assessment data, and a key evidence base to underpin the development of policies and programs for education improvement.

Participation is widely recognized in Northern Ireland as supporting the Department of Education’s vision for “A system that is recognised internationally for the quality of its teaching and learning, for the achievements of its young people and for a holistic approach to education.”<sup>11</sup> Specific interventions informed by this evidence base have included the Engage Programme, which aims to address the impact of COVID-19 on children’s learning. Stakeholders such as the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment also use this evidence base when developing resources for schools.

## The Language/Reading Curriculum in Primary Grades

The curriculum for students assessed in PIRLS 2021 is the Northern Ireland Curriculum, which was introduced during the 2007–2008 academic year. The legislative basis for the curriculum is provided by the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 2006 and the Education (Curriculum Minimum Content) Order (Northern Ireland) 2007.

At Key Stage 2 (Years 5 to 7), the statutory minimum curriculum builds on the curricula from the two earlier stages of primary education, Key Stage 1 (Years 3 and 4) and the Foundation Stage (Years 1 and 2), which are organized with a similar model. The statutory minimum curriculum for Key Stage 2 specifies Language and Literacy as one of the Areas of Learning with the following broad aims:

“Literacy focuses on developing each child’s ability to understand and use language, both spoken and written, as an integral part of learning in all areas. The development of these skills enables children to interact effectively in the world around them, to express themselves creatively and to communicate confidently, using the four modes of communication (Talking and Listening, Reading and Writing) and a variety of skills and media. Language and Literacy should be considered in a holistic way, taking account of the integral nature of Talking and Listening and Reading and Writing which extend across all Areas of Learning.”<sup>12</sup>

The minimum content for Language and Literacy includes three contributory elements through which teachers are expected to help students develop knowledge, understanding, and

skills: talking and listening, reading, and writing. At Key Stage 2, for the domain of Reading, students should be able to:<sup>13</sup>

- Participate in modeled, shared, paired, and guided reading experiences
- Read, explore, understand, and make use of a wide range of traditional and digital texts
- Engage in sustained, independent, and silent reading for enjoyment and information
- Extend the range of their reading and develop their own reading preferences
- Use traditional and digital sources to locate, select, evaluate, and communicate information relevant to a particular task
- Represent their understanding of texts in a variety of ways (e.g., visually, orally, dramatically, digitally)
- Consider, interpret, and discuss texts, exploring how language can be manipulated to affect the reader or engage attention
- Begin to be aware of how media present information, ideas, and events in different ways
- Justify responses to texts logically by inference, deduction, and/or references to evidence within the text
- Reconsider initial responses to texts in light of insight and information that emerge subsequently from reading
- Read aloud to the class or teacher from prepared texts (including original works) using inflection to assist with meaning
- Use a variety of cross-checking strategies to read unfamiliar words in texts
- Use a variety of reading skills for different purposes

Standards of student competency in Language and Literacy are measured through the cross-curricular skill of communication. Across the curriculum, students should be enabled to develop skills in reading at a level appropriate to their ability and be able to:<sup>14</sup>

- Read a variety of texts for information, ideas, and enjoyment
- Use a variety of strategies to read with increasing independence
- Find, select, and use information from a variety of sources
- Understand and explore ideas, events, and features in texts
- Use evidence from texts to explain opinions

## Professional Development Requirements and Programs

There is no legally required minimum length of time for teachers in Northern Ireland to spend on continuing professional development for reading or for any other subject. There is, however, provision for schools to take planned closure days, when the school is closed to students so that

schools can use the time for staff education and school development to prepare for the year ahead. In the 2021–2022 academic year, schools may take up to five additional days.<sup>15</sup>

The performance of all teachers is reviewed annually in accordance with the Performance Review and Staff Development Scheme. This is a structured framework that aims to ensure that training and development needs of individual teachers are identified and that staff development opportunities are aligned with the priorities identified in the School Development Plan.<sup>16</sup>

The Department of Education’s Learning Leaders Strategy was published in 2016, with the aim of creating greater continuity and consistency in all phases of Teacher Professional Learning (TPL).<sup>17</sup> Work is ongoing to develop a coherent model for TPL, which will be applicable across a teacher’s whole career. In support of TPL, the Education Authority prepares and delivers an annually reviewed program of TPL courses and supporting TPL resources that are available to all teachers. Funding for participation is not ring-fenced.

The Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 3 Literacy and Numeracy Continuing Professional Development Project aims to build capacity in teachers by providing TPL in identified aspects of literacy and numeracy, while developing effective collaborative networks of teachers, middle leaders, and schools.

## Monitoring Student Progress in Reading

Statutory assessment requirements apply from the start of the Foundation Stage to the end of Key Stage 3 in each Area of Learning and each cross-curricular skill.<sup>18</sup> The legislative framework for student assessment is provided by the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 2006.

Statutory assessment takes the form of teacher assessment; there are no statutory tests. In the Foundation Stage (Years 1 and 2), the manner of assessment is determined by the school. In Key Stages 1, 2, and 3 (Years 3 to 10), assessment of cross-curricular skills must be carried out using Levels of Progression, which are “can do” statements that set out a continuum of skills that students should be able to demonstrate and that will help them to function effectively in life and the world of work. At the end of Key Stages 1, 2, and 3, teachers must use the levels to make summative assessments of cross-curricular skills.

Teachers’ judgments are supported by assessment tasks and a system of external moderation. The requirements for cross-curricular skills, as outlined in The Language/Reading Curriculum in Primary Grades section, are implemented through these assessment arrangements.

Outcomes of end of key stage assessments are reported to parents and to the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment using numerical levels. The expected level at the end of each respective key stage is:

- Key Stage 1 (Years 3 and 4)—Level 2
- Key Stage 2 (Years 5 to 7)—Level 4
- Key Stage 3 (Years 8 to 10)—Level 5

The primary purpose of these assessments is to raise the quality of educational provision and to advance the skills of students in these crucial areas. The numerical levels are used by some schools to benchmark themselves against the average for Northern Ireland and as a system-level performance indicator. The assessments are not part of the process of student progression to the next stage of education.

In postprimary (secondary) schools, cross-curricular skills are assessed using the Levels of Progression until the end of Key Stage 3. However, the key measures for both student progression and school and system accountability are the external qualifications taken at ages 16, 17, and 18 (typically General Certificate of Secondary Education and General Certificate of Education AS and A levels).

The Department of Education (DE) is currently considering the time frames for a review of statutory assessment arrangements, which have been significantly impacted in recent years by Action Short of Strike and COVID-19.

In addition to assessment at school, many parents of students in the final year of primary education elect for their children to take “transfer tests” for admission to academically selective postprimary schools, which administer the tests. These tests focus on English and mathematics and are based on the content of the Northern Ireland Curriculum in these subjects. In 2016, the Minister of Education reversed the previous policy on preventing primary schools from facilitating the unregulated tests. In 2021, *A Fair Start*—a report by an expert panel appointed by the Minister of Education to examine educational underachievement in Northern Ireland—noted that the pressure to prepare for the tests could lead to a skewing of the Key Stage 2 curriculum from Year 6, focusing on literacy and numeracy at the expense of other Areas of Learning.<sup>19,20</sup>

Exhibit 2 provides an overview of the use of assessment in literacy in Years 1 to 10.

**Exhibit 2: Literacy Assessment in Northern Ireland, Years 1 to 10**

Type of Assessment	Foundation Stage			Key Stage 1			Key Stage 2			Key Stage 3	
M—Mandatory O—Optional	Year										
	1	2	3	4	5	6 <sup>a</sup>	7	8	9	10	
	Age										
	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	
Ongoing teacher assessment of all Areas of Learning (manner of assessment and reporting determined by school)	M	M	M	M	M	M	M	M	M	M	
Ongoing teacher assessment of cross-curricular skills (manner of assessment and reporting determined by school)	M	M									
Ongoing teacher assessment of cross-curricular skills against Levels of Progression			M	M	M	M	M	M	M	M	
End of key stage teacher assessment of cross-curricular skills against Levels of Progression (moderated and reported using numerical outcomes)*				M			M			M	
Computer-based diagnostic standardized tests (tests from commercial providers utilized by schools)			O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	
Transfer tests (taken by students applying to selective postprimary schools)*							O				

\* Participation in end of key stage assessment was significantly impacted by Action Short of Strike, and arrangements were suspended during COVID-19. Transfer tests were canceled in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic and were held in November/December 2021 for admission in 2022.

## Special Reading Initiatives

All schools have a responsibility to meet the education needs of all their students, including high-achieving and lower-achieving students. *Every School a Good School: A Policy for School Improvement* was published in 2009. It was designed to support and, where necessary, motivate schools in improving the quality of educational provision and outcomes for their students, particularly in literacy and numeracy.<sup>21</sup> *Count, Read: Succeed: A Strategy to Improve Outcomes in Literacy and Numeracy* was published in 2011 to further raise overall standards and close

<sup>a</sup> In Northern Ireland, PIRLS Year 4 is equivalent to Year 6 (ages 9 and 10).



achievement gaps. The strategy emphasizes high-quality teaching, early intervention to support students experiencing difficulties, better links with parents and communities, and more effective sharing of best practices. The strategy also sets an expectation that primary schools provide a systematic program of high-quality phonics instruction.<sup>22</sup>

An important, albeit short-term, initiative was the Delivering Social Change Literacy and Numeracy Signature Programme, launched in 2012 to improve literacy and numeracy as part of a wider government initiative tackling poverty and social exclusion. Recently qualified teachers who were not in a permanent teaching post were recruited to provide additional support for students at risk of underachievement. The program ran during the 2013–2014 and 2014–2015 academic years and involved 151 primary schools. The Education and Training Inspectorate’s 2015 evaluation of this program found highly effective practices.<sup>23</sup> Although the program ended in June 2015, a 2016 evaluation identified evidence of the program’s legacy.<sup>24</sup>

There are also some programs that target disadvantage at the area level such as the North Belfast Primary Principals Support Programme, the West Belfast Sharing the Learning Programme, and the West Belfast Community Project.

Alongside these focused programs, a broader range of policies and programs aims to support children in their learning and to help offset the impact of social disadvantage. They include:

- Preschool programs: Sure Start, Early Years Pathways Fund, Pre-School Education Programme, Extended Services Funding
- Extended services within school settings: Extended Schools Programme, Nurture Groups, Bright Start School Age Childcare Programme, free school meals
- Other support for families and parents: parental engagement advertising campaigns, student attendance interventions, school uniform grants

## Response to COVID-19 Pandemic

### Teaching and Learning During the COVID-19 Pandemic

#### School Closures

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, there were periods when primary schools in Northern Ireland were closed for the majority of children, and remote learning was introduced. These periods were as follows:

- March 23 to June 30, 2020: Schools closed.
- Week starting August 24, 2020: Students returned to school.
- Week starting October 19, 2020: Schools closed for two weeks (extended midterm break).
- November 2, 2020: Students returned to school.
- January 7, 2021: Schools closed.



- March 8, 2021: Years 1 to 3 returned to school.
- March 22, 2021: Years 4 to 7 returned to school.<sup>25</sup>

### Remote Learning

Remote learning has been required across the Northern Ireland education system during periods of school closures. Since the beginning of the 2020–2021 academic year, schools also were asked to have contingency plans in place for the delivery of remote learning in the event of an individual school closure, or if a class or large group of students needed to self-isolate.

DE guidance on supporting remote learning was published in early June 2020. It advised schools to take a pragmatic approach to delivering the curriculum, prioritizing key knowledge, understanding, and skills in each Area of Learning. At the same time, the guidance recommended that all schools aim to engage with students on an ongoing basis through the wide range of e-learning platforms available.<sup>26</sup> Further advice issued in late June for the 2020–2021 academic year again emphasized that schools had the flexibility and authority to make decisions that best suited the needs of their students.<sup>27</sup> Updated guidance on remote learning was published in January 2021, and further advice has been issued to schools when necessary.<sup>28</sup> A wide range of resources, guidance materials, and case studies were produced by DE, while the Education Authority developed a range of online Teacher Professional Learning sessions related to teaching during COVID-19.

When a second period of extended remote learning started in January 2021, Educational Continuity Directions issued by DE placed legal requirements upon schools to deliver remote learning and take account of DE’s updated guidance to support them in this process.

### Curriculum Planning

The Department of Education has provided advice for schools planning for academic year 2021–2022 in the context of education recovery:

“Gaps in curriculum coverage and children’s understanding are complex issues. Children’s needs will vary and not all gaps can – or should – be addressed immediately. As part of a well sequenced curriculum, however, teachers will have identified the key knowledge and concepts that need further embedded before children can move on. There are undoubtedly key knowledge, skills, vocabulary, and concepts which allow pupils to make sense of later work and which should be prioritised.”<sup>29</sup>

### Additional Resources

Plans to provide digital devices to disadvantaged children were announced in May 2020. By February 2021, 5,500 children in priority year groups (Year 4 and Year 7) had benefited from the scheme, though applications from eligible primary school children in other year groups were yet to be processed—so the PIRLS cohort would not have directly benefited from this scheme.

In July 2020, the Minister of Education announced that free Wi-Fi and mobile connectivity would be provided to children and young people who did not have access to digital technology. By February 2021, a total of 7,000 children (across primary and secondary levels) had benefited from the scheme.<sup>30,31</sup>

The Engage Programme was launched in September 2020. This forms a significant part of efforts to address the impact of COVID-19 on students' education. The program, which was given £16 million in funding (2020–2021 academic year), enables primary and postprimary schools to provide additional teaching support for students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. The funding was to be used to secure additional qualified teachers, enabling schools to provide child-centered one-to-one, small-group, or team teaching support to those students who stand to benefit the most. The program is continuing on a larger scale in the 2021–2022 academic year.<sup>32,33</sup>

Summer Schemes were funded by DE in 2020 and 2021 in an effort to offset the negative impact of COVID-19 and help students make a successful return to learning in the new school year. The schemes placed a focus on emotional health and well-being and included interactive and fun activities, as well as learning activities as and where appropriate.<sup>34</sup>

### Special Provisions

Vulnerable children, including children with statements of special education needs, had access to schools with supervised learning during the periods of school closure. During the first period of extended school closures, provision for these children was mostly based on a cluster system, whereby one school in a group of schools would stay open, allowing the others to use its premises. However, there was a very small uptake of places, and the provisions did not cover all children with special education needs and disabilities (SEND). Some planning support was provided to schools by the Education Authority and by Health and Social Care Northern Ireland. Additional funding of £6.3 million announced in the autumn was made available to the Education Authority to support children with SEND in response to the pandemic, estimated as equivalent to approximately £83 per student.<sup>35,36</sup> Uptake of supervised learning in schools was significantly higher during the second period of school closures from January to March 2021, when all special schools remained open to provide teaching and learning.

### Impact of the Pandemic on Student Learning

The Education and Training Inspectorate has published the findings of a consultation with students about their learning experiences during the second COVID-19 pandemic lockdown from January to March 2021. For primary (Year 6 and Year 7) students, the key messages include the following:

- Around 88 percent of the students reported that they enjoyed learning during lockdown all, most, or some of the time; 43 percent enjoyed learning for all or most of the time.

- The students' responses show that their learning was helped most by the following approaches: referring to a planner or timetable in organizing their learning (52 percent); keeping active doing PE and other physical activities (54 percent); working independently on projects (45 percent); completing online tasks (47 percent); completing tasks using booklets, worksheets, and exercise books (46 percent); and watching videos from their teacher or classroom assistant (51 percent). Around 33 percent of students reported that they were helped by live lessons, but just 13 percent reported they were helped through opportunities to work online in pairs or larger groups.
- Around 74 percent of the students reported that they had difficulty completing work all, most, or some of the time; 15 percent of them had difficulty all or most of the time. The students relied mainly on parents/caregivers (80 percent) and their teachers/classroom assistants (47 percent) for help.

The Centre for Research in Educational Underachievement at Stranmillis University College, Belfast, has published two reports based on surveys of parents' and caregivers' experiences of homeschooling during the COVID-19 pandemic. The first report highlighted the often very different experiences of children and young people during the first six weeks of the first lockdown in 2020.<sup>37</sup> A follow-up survey of parents and caregivers during the second extended period of home learning from January to March/April 2021 found the following:

- Homeschooling favors children with better-educated parents who (as in 2020) felt more confident in their homeschooling role and were more likely to play an active role in supporting their child's learning.
- Digital accessibility at home is strongly related to household income, although there was a slight increase from 2020 in the number of digital devices available to children.
- Most parents/caregivers were happy with both the quality and the quantity of learning resources provided by their children's schools.<sup>38</sup>

In January and February 2021, the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) engaged with primary schools to understand their experiences of monitoring and evaluating the delivery and quality of remote learning provision, and delivering the Engage Programme. Findings included the following:

- Schools had transitioned well to remote learning.
- Most children received well-structured learning experiences.
- Key areas of the curriculum were being delivered well.
- Live teaching had particular barriers for all schools, and many children were impacted adversely by digital poverty.
- Many parents and caregivers needed help to support their children's learning.

DE is currently considering the need for a systemwide assessment of students' attainment, for example, a standardized literacy or numeracy assessment for a sample of students at the system

level. In the interim, DE believes that participation in PIRLS 2021, Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) 2023, and Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) studies will provide system-level comparable data on pre- and post-COVID attainment in literacy, mathematics, and science.

### **Policy and Practice Changes**

*A Fair Start* is the final report by an expert panel appointed by the Minister of Education in September 2020 to examine the links between educational underachievement and socioeconomic background. The panel noted that the move to remote and blended learning since March 2020 as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic had exacerbated the persistent issue of poor broadband coverage in some rural areas, impacting the ability of children to access online resources. The panel recommended that, learning from the lessons of COVID-19, DE should expand and accelerate its delivery of digital devices/broadband to learners so that there is equitable access to learning.<sup>39</sup> The plan developed by the panel contains 47 actions across a six-year period at a cost of approximately £73 million per annum if fully realized. DE is now working with relevant stakeholders to take this work forward.

DE has also encouraged school leaders and teachers to reflect on how their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic can create new possibilities to do things differently and, in this way, transform learning experiences permanently. For example, schools have harnessed and utilized the suite of available technological tools to create content for remote learning across all Areas of Learning, and audio marking has enhanced teacher feedback significantly.<sup>40,41</sup>

### **Impact of the Pandemic on PIRLS 2021**

PIRLS 2021 was originally scheduled to take place between May and June 2021 in Northern Ireland. In March 2021, the Minister of Education made the decision to postpone the main study data collection until September to October 2021. This was due to the ongoing public health situation and because there was no guarantee that schools would be fully open by May 2021. As a result, participating students were at the beginning of Year 7 (having returned to school after the summer break) instead of being near the end of Year 6, as in previous cycles.

PIRLS 2021 was administratively challenging in Northern Ireland compared with prepandemic cycles. Some schools were still operating with a grouping system, whereby children could not mix between groups, which affected some PIRLS classes. Some administrations had to be rearranged at short notice to accommodate a high number of absences. Despite these challenges, the main study data collection was able to proceed, and the participation targets were met.

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