

# Ireland

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## Introduction

### Overview of Education System

To a large extent, the education system in Ireland is centralized. The system comprises early childhood, primary, postprimary, third level, and further education. Overall responsibility for primary and postprimary education is vested in the Minister for Education, while the Department of Education (DoE), along with a number of bodies under its aegis, is responsible for ongoing administration and management of the system. The Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science 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 vast majority of primary and postprimary schools receive state funding, although most are not state-owned. State-funded schools are required to operate under the Education Act (1998)<sup>1</sup> and the curriculum, assessment, and evaluation framework established by the DoE based on advice from the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA). The DoE's Inspectorate division evaluates and reports on education provision in all schools and centers of education supported by the Department. Most schools are owned by private patron bodies, most commonly religious denominations. As of September 2020, 90 percent of primary school students were enrolled in schools under Roman Catholic patronage.<sup>2</sup> The patron body typically appoints a Board of Management, which manages each school locally in line with national policies and legislation. In addition to mainstream and special state-funded primary schools, the primary sector includes a small number of private primary schools that receive no state funding and are not inspected by the DoE.

Early Years settings are funded by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth to deliver a universal free Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) program. Since 2018, children are eligible for an optional two years of state-funded provision through this program, between the ages of 2 years, 8 months and 5 years, 6 months or their entry to primary

school.<sup>3</sup> Early Years settings are obliged, under the terms of their grant agreement, to follow the provisions of the national quality and curriculum frameworks<sup>4,5</sup> and to facilitate inspection by the DoE's Inspectorate.

Children may start primary school at no younger than 4 years, and must start by the time they turn 6.<sup>6</sup> Primary education comprises an eight-year program: the early primary grades of Junior and Senior Infants, followed by Grades 1 to 6 (First Class to Sixth Class). The Primary School Curriculum<sup>7</sup> must be implemented in all state-funded primary schools, although some aspects may be delivered with regard to the “characteristic spirit” or ethos of the school.<sup>8</sup> Each school designates either Irish or English as its Language 1 (i.e., the language mainly used for communication and instruction in the school), with the other language as Language 2. Irish is Language 1 in about 8 percent of primary schools, with English as Language 1 in the remainder.

Postprimary education consists of a compulsory three-year junior cycle program, followed by senior cycle, which consists of an optional one-year Transition Year program before students choose one of three 2-year programs: Leaving Certificate, Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme, or Leaving Certificate Applied, each leading to a terminal state examination. About 7 in 10 students opt to extend the senior cycle to three years by completing Transition Year, designed to foster development through a broad range of educational and vocational experiences, after the junior cycle.<sup>9</sup> The structure and content of senior cycle are currently under review.<sup>10</sup>

The majority of postprimary schools in receipt of state funding are privately owned “voluntary” schools (a minority of which charge tuition fees). The postprimary sector also includes vocational, community, and comprehensive schools. Although the curriculum is substantially similar across school types, not all schools offer all pathways—for example, not all schools offer a Transition Year or alternatives to the Leaving Certificate. A very small number of privately owned and managed postprimary schools receive no state funding and are not inspected by the DoE.

### **Use and Impact of PIRLS**

Ireland has participated in two previous cycles of PIRLS (2011 and 2016). PIRLS 2011 marked the first time that primary schools in Ireland took part in an international large-scale assessment of reading. The relatively strong performance of students in Ireland was encouraging, particularly as the reading performance of postprimary students in the 2009 cycle of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) had suggested a concerning decline. In 2016, Ireland participated in both PIRLS and ePIRLS, which provided additional insight into how well students could read for informational purposes in digital as well as paper contexts.<sup>11</sup> The significant improvement in mean performance in Ireland between 2011 and 2016 received positive media coverage, as did the similar performance of students in Ireland across paper and digital assessments.

Between 2011 and 2020, the National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy was a significant driver of literacy policy in Ireland.<sup>12</sup> The Strategy, which was already in preparation

while PIRLS 2011 was taking place, included a requirement for sampled schools to participate in PIRLS. The improved performance of students in Ireland in PIRLS 2016 relative to 2011 sometimes was cited as evidence that aspects of the Strategy related to literacy at the primary level were working well. A successor strategy for literacy and numeracy over the coming decade is currently in preparation. It is expected that findings from previous PIRLS cycles, including analyses of questionnaire data, will help to inform this next strategy.

The framework and methodology of PIRLS have been influential in the design of Ireland's National Assessment of English Reading, as well as in the recent redevelopment of some standardized tests of reading used in Irish primary schools.

PIRLS 2021, along with the National Assessment of 2021, will help to gauge if and how students' reading literacy in Ireland has been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and associated disruption to education.

## The Language/Reading Curriculum in Primary Grades

Between 2015 and 2019, the Primary Language Curriculum (PLC) was implemented on a phased basis for students of all abilities in all primary and special schools.<sup>13</sup> It is an integrated language curriculum that supports teaching and learning in both English and Irish, and replaces the previous (1999) English and Irish curriculum specifications for primary schools.<sup>14,15</sup> The PLC builds on the experiences provided for by Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework, emphasizing oral language development and other literacy experiences for young children through its theme of Communicating. Connections also are made through the use of play and a playful pedagogy as an important context for language and literacy development. The PLC for students in second grade and below was published in September 2015 and took effect, following professional development support, in September 2016. For students in Grades 3 to 6, the PLC took effect in September 2019. Therefore, the PIRLS 2021 cohort, most of whom began Junior Infants in September 2015, should have continuously experienced language instruction based on the PLC throughout much of their primary education. In contrast, the PIRLS 2011 and 2016 cohorts in Ireland had experienced language instruction based on the 1999 English and Irish curriculum specifications.

The development of the PLC was a significant milestone in Irish primary education and paves the way for future curricular developments. While building on aspects of the previous curriculum, the PLC also recognizes significant societal changes and research into children's language learning that have emerged in recent decades. Consistent with these insights, the PLC uses an approach designed to support the transfer of skills across languages. The PLC supports teaching and learning in English and Irish by providing the same structure across the languages through the use of learning outcomes and strands. This supports the transfer of skills from the school's first language to its second language, whereas the 1999 curriculum specifications for English and Irish used different structures for each language and provided less explicit support for the transfer of skills

from one language to another. The PLC also recognizes the linguistically and culturally diverse population of Irish classrooms and emphasizes the importance of appreciating and nurturing children’s home languages within the school environment. This is reflected in the underpinning approaches to language learning and in the learning outcomes. In this way, the PLC acknowledges language learning as a developmental process that is influenced and supported by a range of contexts including schools, families, and communities.

The PLC presents the intended learning and development for all children by describing a rationale, aims, strands and elements, and learning outcomes. The curriculum is supported by an online toolkit of additional support materials for teachers, such as examples of children’s language learning, progression continua for each strand, and materials that focus on pedagogical approaches to language learning as well as specific concepts and skills.<sup>a</sup> The toolkit will continue to evolve over the lifetime of the curriculum to respond to the identified needs of teachers and children.<sup>b</sup>

The aims of the PLC relate to three broad themes: children and their lives, children’s communications and connections with others, and children’s language learning and development. The three strands of the PLC are oral language, reading, and writing (all relating to both English and Irish). Across the strands, three elements describe essential language learning: developing communicative relationships through language; understanding the content and structure of language; and exploring and using language. Each element has a set of learning outcomes, which describe important concepts, dispositions, and skills. The learning outcomes for fourth grade students, across the three elements but within the reading strand only, are shown in Exhibit 1.

The **Developing communicative relationships through language** (Communicating) element focuses on developing children’s knowledge and understanding of how we build and share meaning together in communicative relationships, as listeners and speakers, and as givers and receivers of information. The learning outcomes for this element promote enjoyment, motivation, choice, and a sense of purpose and engagement in using language to communicate with others.

The **Understanding the content and structure of language** (Understanding) element focuses on developing the ability of children to create and interact successfully with texts using increasingly sophisticated knowledge and understanding of the content and structure of language. The learning outcomes associated with this element focus on sentence structure and grammar, oral vocabulary and reading vocabulary, conventions of print, phonological and phonemic awareness, word recognition, spelling, and comprehension.

The **Exploring and using language** element prioritizes the development of children’s ability to explore and use language for a wide range of purposes, in a variety of genres, and with a range of audiences, familiar and unfamiliar. The learning outcomes for this element focus on a wide

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<sup>a</sup> For more information, see <https://curriculumonline.ie/Primary/Curriculum-Areas/Primary-Language/Primary-Language-Toolkit/>

<sup>b</sup> Unless otherwise stated, the information in the remainder of this section is drawn directly or closely from the Primary Language Curriculum (see reference 13).

range of language functions and genres across oral language, reading, and writing, as well as on fluency, comprehension, handwriting, the writing process, and the author’s intent.

The PLC explicitly names approaches that underpin language teaching and learning. These include second language learning, linguistic diversity, transfer of skills, immersion, Content Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), language and cultural awareness, play, digital literacy, disciplinary literacy, and critical literacy.

**Exhibit 1: Learning Outcomes for Reading at Stage 3: Grade 3 and Grade 4 (Third and Fourth Classes)<sup>c</sup>**

Element	Label	Learning Outcome Through appropriately engaging learning experiences, children should be able to:
Communicating	Engagement, listening, and attention	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Develop their interest in and enjoyment of literature and reading in a variety of genres across the curriculum.</li> <li>▪ Engage with texts of increasing complexity and discover and explore texts in various languages.</li> </ul>
	Motivation and choice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Choose, read, and critically respond to texts in a range of genres and languages across the curriculum for pleasure, interest, and specific purposes.</li> </ul>
Understanding	Conventions of print and sentence structure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Analyze and compare conventions of print in texts of increasing complexity.</li> <li>▪ Analyze sentence structures, including simple, compound, and complex sentences in texts.</li> <li>▪ Compare sentence structures and texts in various languages.</li> </ul>
	Phonological and phonemic awareness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Compare sounds and patterns in words found in texts in various genres across the curriculum.</li> <li>▪ Recognize and compare sounds in words in English, Irish, and other languages and across dialects and accents.</li> </ul>
	Phonics, word recognition, and word study	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Use a range of word identification strategies flexibly and with confidence when reading instructional and independent-level texts across the curriculum.</li> <li>▪ Use existing language skills and knowledge to decipher text in other languages.</li> </ul>
	Vocabulary	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Acquire deep and broad vocabulary knowledge to facilitate independent comprehension of texts, to include subject-specific texts.</li> <li>▪ Draw on an increasing knowledge of word structure and word parts, including prefixes, suffixes, and root words, to independently uncover the meaning of words encountered in texts. Use knowledge of synonyms, antonyms, homonyms, homographs, and homophones to clarify and discuss the meaning of new and known vocabulary.</li> <li>▪ Use appropriate reference materials to independently uncover the meaning of unknown words.</li> </ul>

<sup>c</sup> Adapted from National Council for Curriculum and Assessment. (2019). *Primary Language Curriculum*.

Element	Label	Learning Outcome Through appropriately engaging learning experiences, children should be able to:
Exploring and Using	Purpose, genre, and voice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Identify and discuss features of texts that convey a particular purpose, genre, or voice and infer meanings that are not explicitly stated.</li> <li>▪ Respond to the aesthetic, creative, and imaginative aspects of a wide range of texts in various genres across the curriculum and defend their preferences and opinions.</li> </ul>
	Response and author's intent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Compare, contrast, and critically reflect on the intent of different authors and discuss various interpretations of text in a wide range of genres.</li> </ul>
	Comprehension	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Compare and select comprehension strategies flexibly and interchangeably and use background knowledge to engage with text in a variety of genres independently or collaboratively.</li> </ul>
	Fluency and self-correction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Read texts in a variety of genres effortlessly with appropriate pace, accuracy, and expression for a variety of audiences.</li> </ul>

## Professional Development Requirements and Programs

Primary teachers in Ireland qualify through a four-year, full-time Bachelor of Education degree or a two-year Professional Master of Education (PME) degree in Primary Teaching. There are four state-funded Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) that offer programs of primary initial teacher education, and one privately owned, nonstate-funded company that offers the PME in Primary Teaching. The Department of Education specifies minimum entry requirements in Maths, English, and Irish for entry to Bachelor of Education programs and, since September 2021, these also apply to the PME in Primary Teaching. The Teaching Council is the professional standards body for the teaching profession, with which all teachers in state-funded schools are required to register. Registration now involves completing the *Droichead* process, an integrated induction framework comprising school-based induction supported by a professional support team and additional professional learning activities, with a particular emphasis on literacy and numeracy.<sup>16</sup>

Fully qualified teachers are not compelled to participate in professional development but are encouraged to do so, with the support of the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST), the National Council for Special Education (NCSE), and a nationwide network of Education Centres. On foot of the National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy (2011–2020), a number of measures were implemented to increase opportunities for and engagement with teachers' professional learning around literacy. Dedicated Literacy and Language teams were established within the PDST. School self-evaluation (SSE) was introduced in 2012, including SSE with a focus on literacy (and numeracy), and extensive professional development to support this was rolled out. It became a requirement for all online summer courses for teachers to include literacy, as well as numeracy and digital skills, in their programs.<sup>17</sup> Targeted support for teachers



in designated disadvantaged (DEIS) schools was a priority under the Strategy, and this was reaffirmed in the DEIS Plan published in 2017.<sup>18</sup>

In PIRLS 2016, data for Ireland indicated significantly higher engagement by teachers in reading-related professional development than had been the case in 2011.<sup>19</sup> This may reflect uptake of the Strategy-related initiatives described above.

When the Primary Language Curriculum (PLC) for all primary grade levels was launched in 2019, all schools had access to a one-day introductory seminar between September 2019 and January 2020. This was followed by the introduction of sustained support for the PLC, starting with a first cohort of schools. However, this phase of support was paused between March and June 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic and was paused further for the 2020–2021 academic year. To maintain momentum, the PDST put in place a number of online supports for the curriculum, including e-bulletins, webinars, online workshops, and a manual on effective literacy instruction. Sustained support recommenced online in May 2021, and in September 2021, this support reverted to the face-to-face model.

A series of additional online supports for embedding the PLC have been made available to all schools. A series of webinars has been rolled out each term, with which schools can engage during a half-day closure for this purpose. These webinars are prerecorded, and participation is self-directed. Webinar themes to date have focused on learning outcomes, playful pedagogies, assessment, inclusion, and developing critical literacy.

## Monitoring Student Progress in Reading

Under Section 22 of the Education Act, schools must evaluate students regularly and periodically report the results of the evaluation to the students and their parents. Guidelines published in 2007 by the NCCA describe assessment approaches that range from those that are child-led (e.g., self-assessment, conferencing) to those that are teacher-led (teacher-designed tasks, tests). They also specify that schools should report to parents on students' progress at least twice a year.<sup>20</sup>

The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy (2011–2020) introduced a formal requirement for all primary schools to administer standardized tests of English reading and mathematics—and, in Irish-medium schools, Irish—at Grades 2, 4, and 6. Schools may choose from a small range of standardized tests normed for an Irish population and aligned to the curriculum. Aggregated results of these tests are reported at the school level to the Department of Education. These data are not made public in any way that could identify individual schools and may not be used for the compilation of school comparison league tables. In practice, most schools also administer standardized tests of reading and mathematics at Grades 1, 3, and 5, although this is not mandatory.

Individual results from standardized tests must be made available to parents. The NCCA provides a suite of report card templates that schools can use to report student progress to parents.

Teachers are encouraged to report on students’ progress based on evidence gathered over the year using a range of formal and informal assessment methods, including standardized test results if applicable. When students move from primary to postprimary school (after sixth grade), there is a requirement for schools to report on their progress using the NCCA-developed Education Passport to support the transition. Children’s standardized test results from Grades 2, 4, and 6 are included in the information transferred to postprimary schools.<sup>d</sup> Approximately every five years, National Assessments of Mathematics and English Reading (NAMER) are conducted by the Educational Research Centre on behalf of the Department of Education to monitor achievement nationally, report on progress toward targets, identify variables related to test performance, and inform policy. In the most recent cycle of NAMER in 2021, almost 10,500 students in Grades 2 and 6 took part. Due to constraints imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, English reading was assessed in second grade only (and mathematics in sixth grade only).

## Special Reading Initiatives

The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy (2011–2020) constituted a comprehensive national program aiming to improve literacy and numeracy standards in preprimary, primary, and postprimary settings. The Strategy outlined the need to identify effective approaches to promote and support the development of literacy skills, and to involve parents/guardians, families, and communities, as well as staff in schools and early childhood care and education centers, in supporting children’s learning. However, implementation of various initiatives was at the school level rather than the national level, so rates of participation varied.

Many schools in Ireland partake in initiatives or programs such as Drop Everything and Read (DEAR) or Literacy Lift Off to foster the enjoyment and practice of reading. Schools also may participate in community-based literacy projects, such as the Right to Read program by Libraries Ireland, to promote reading development for people of all ages and backgrounds.

In Ireland, almost all schools have special education teachers (SETs) available for children experiencing difficulties with learning, including reading difficulties. (In PIRLS 2016, 98 percent of students in Ireland were in schools whose teachers reported having a SET available at least some of the time.)

The Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) program administered by the Department of Education addresses educational disadvantage by providing additional supports. These include DEIS grants, enhanced book grants, access to the School Meals Programme, and access to planning and professional development supports. At the primary level, a distinction is drawn between disadvantaged schools in urban and rural areas, with those in urban areas receiving further supports depending on their level of disadvantage, for example, access to the School

<sup>d</sup> See <https://ncca.ie/en/primary/reporting-and-transfer/> for more information.



Completion Programme, Home School Community Liaison Coordinators, and—for the schools designated as most disadvantaged (DEIS Band 1)—reduced student-teacher ratios.<sup>21</sup> The DEIS initiative also encompasses targeted programs to develop literacy (and numeracy) skills, such as Reading Recovery. Reading Recovery is an intensive early intervention for children who may be at risk of reading failure and provides one-to-one teaching for 30 minutes each day, supplementary to ongoing literacy activities in the classroom. Depending on progression, the support lasts for 8 to 20 weeks.<sup>22</sup> The Interim Review of the National Strategy (2017) led to the establishment of a number of literacy (and numeracy) targets specific to DEIS Band 1 primary schools and DEIS postprimary schools.

The government’s annual budget announced in October 2021 included a once-off allocation of 20 million euros to schools for the purchase of books, audiobooks, and other materials to support their literacy resources.<sup>23</sup>

## Response to COVID-19 Pandemic

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

All schools in Ireland were physically closed from March 12, 2020, until the start of the new academic year in September 2020. Schools were asked to continue to provide for remote teaching and learning opportunities and to support students’ progress in learning during this time. This initial closure period thrust teachers and students into the world of remote instruction with little experience or preparation.

Guidance issued by the Department of Education in April 2020 suggested a number of approaches, including phone and email contact from school staff to students and parents/guardians; assigning independent work; devising learning opportunities based on television programs (including Home School Hub and Cúla 4 ar Scoil, programs specifically designed to support home learning during the closures); holding school assemblies on local radio platforms or equivalent; and using video conferencing software for remote lessons.<sup>24</sup> Specific guidance also was issued to schools in April 2020 to support the remote learning of students with special education needs and those most at risk of educational disadvantage. Additionally, guidance was published to assist parents/guardians as they supported their children’s learning from home during the school closures. In May 2020, the Department issued further guidance specifying that, where possible, teachers should engage with students on a daily basis or at least a number of times each week.<sup>25</sup> Standardized testing of reading and mathematics in 2020 was canceled. In May 2020, the government announced that the state certificate examinations in postprimary education also were to be canceled and replaced by a system of calculated grades.

Prior to the reopening of schools in autumn 2020, the Department of Education provided curriculum guidance for all primary school leaders and teachers. This guidance advised schools to prioritize literacy, numeracy, and well-being in the early weeks and months of the return to face-

to-face teaching. Teachers were encouraged to use a range of strategies to identify the needs of students and to provide support to help them reengage with face-to-face learning. It was recommended that literacy (and numeracy) skills also be developed throughout the school day using an integrated, cross-curricular approach.

From September to December 2020, with the exception of some individual school closures due to COVID-19 outbreaks, schools were open for in-person instruction. Where individual students, classes, or schools reverted to remote learning due to COVID-19 outbreaks, teachers were required to provide remote teaching and learning for the duration of this period. However, due to the worsening epidemiological situation after the winter holidays, a further period of nationwide closures commenced in January 2021. Again, schools were required to provide remote instruction. This time, there was a preexisting requirement for schools to have a digital communications/learning platform in place to facilitate continuity of teaching and learning.<sup>26</sup> Guidelines updated prior to this closure further specified that teachers should communicate with students on a daily basis, that a mixture of direct instruction and independent learning tasks should be used, and that workbook and textbook tasks should be supplemented or replaced with other learning tasks.<sup>27</sup> During this closure period, the Inspectorate provided dedicated email and phone support lines to advise schools on how to implement the curriculum in a remote context.<sup>28</sup> Students returned to in-person instruction on a phased basis between February 22 and April 12, 2021.<sup>e</sup>

The return to in-person instruction was supported by guidance for teachers. This guidance advised teachers to give students time to settle back into face-to-face instruction while using observation and other tools to ascertain where students were in their learning, in particular in literacy and numeracy. Active, playful, and engaging learning methodologies were promoted, and teachers were advised to be flexible in addressing needs arising from varied remote learning experiences, for example by adapting lesson length and using visual prompts to support routines. Teachers were encouraged to avoid overly didactic approaches to “catch up” and were advised to use the Continuum of Support<sup>f</sup> to identify and provide support to those with additional needs. Talk and discussion were encouraged, as were collaborative, integrated learning and the use of the outdoor environment. Schools remained open for in-person instruction throughout the 2021–2022 academic year (again, with the exception of individual school closures due to outbreaks of COVID-19).

Since September 2020, schools have been required to provide adapted education provision (generally in the form of remote instruction) for students medically certified as at “very high risk” from COVID-19. Students medically certified as “high risk” and students with household contacts

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<sup>e</sup> Students with special education needs were first to return to in-person instruction on February 22, 2021. On March 1, the junior classes in primary school (Junior Infants to second grade) returned, along with final-year postprimary students. On March 15, all remaining primary school students (Grades 3 to 6) returned, along with postprimary students in their penultimate year. On April 12, remaining postprimary students returned to in-person instruction.

<sup>f</sup> See <https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/dca316-special-education-needs-a-continuum-of-support/> for more information.

at “very high risk” or “high risk” had no entitlement to adapted education provision and were expected to return to classrooms when in-person instruction was available.<sup>29</sup> However, the number of families applying to homeschool children in 2020–2021 rose substantially compared to the previous year.<sup>30</sup>

### Impact of the Pandemic on Student Learning

The impact of the pandemic on student learning has yet to be evaluated systematically. However, the available evidence suggests that many students faced significant challenges—particularly students with fewer home resources during periods of remote learning. During the 2020 closure, a majority of 12-year-olds surveyed by the Growing Up in Ireland study never had access to online classes, while a quarter did not always have access to a suitable computer at home, and half did not always have a quiet place to study.<sup>31</sup> Other reports show that parents/guardians and principals of primary school students expressed similar concerns.<sup>32,33</sup> Students spent considerably more time on learning activities during the second closure period (January to March 2021) than during the first period (March to June 2020).<sup>34</sup> This was confirmed by research conducted by the Inspectorate of the Department of Education in early 2021, when survey findings indicated that the level of support provided to learners across primary schools during January to February 2021 was higher than that provided in the previous period of school closure in 2020. In the February 2021 surveys, most parents of primary children agreed that their child was well supported by the school to engage with their work.<sup>35</sup>

The National Assessment of English Reading and Mathematics (NAMER) 2021, along with PIRLS 2021, will provide the first large-scale assessment data that can be used to explore the impact of COVID-19 on student learning in Ireland.

### Policy and Practice Changes

Enforced periods of remote learning highlighted a digital divide in access to Information and Communications Technology (ICT), with inequity of access both to high-speed broadband and to digital devices.<sup>36,37</sup> The ICT grant already pledged to schools in 2020 as part of Ireland’s Digital Strategy for Schools (40 million euros) was supplemented by an additional grant of 10 million euros to address ICT needs identified in the context of the pandemic, e.g., purchasing devices for students in need and setting up learning platforms to support remote learning.<sup>38</sup>

In 2021 and 2022, the Department of Education–funded summer provision program, previously available only for students in special schools/classes and those in designated disadvantaged (DEIS) schools, was expanded to include places for students with complex needs and/or at risk of educational disadvantage in all schools.<sup>39</sup> Individual schools had the discretion to choose whether to provide a summer program.

In September 2021, the COVID Learning and Support Scheme (CLASS) was implemented to help schools mitigate adverse impacts of the pandemic on student learning and well-being. The

scheme provided a once-off allocation of additional teaching hours, which schools could use to provide extra teaching support for students at increased risk of learning loss and/or early school leaving. The scheme also involves a forum in which schools can share information about effective mitigation strategies.<sup>40</sup>

A report on the impact of COVID-19 on education was published by a government committee in January 2021. Its recommendations included the rollout of hot meals and counseling supports in all schools and the establishment of a centralized National Online Learning Program by the Department of Education.<sup>41</sup> It has not yet been determined whether these will be implemented.

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

The PIRLS 2021 field trial in Ireland was interrupted by the school closures of March 2020. Prior to the closures, testing was completed in 10 out of 40 schools. No further collection of field trial data was possible.

Ireland had planned to administer PIRLS digitally in 2021. This required rented laptops to be brought to schools by technical support engineers, as ICT infrastructure in Irish primary schools varies widely. In light of potential COVID-19 risks associated with this approach, Ireland reverted to paper-based testing for the main PIRLS data collection. Unfortunately, this meant that Ireland could not participate in the ePIRLS component despite having done so in 2016 and in the 2021 field trial.

The PIRLS 2021 data collection was due to take place in Ireland in spring 2021 with students approaching the end of fourth grade. Due to the disruptions to schooling caused by the pandemic, the Department of Education opted to postpone PIRLS to autumn 2021, with students at the start of fifth grade. In the majority of cases, the class groups that had been sampled for spring testing remained sampled for autumn testing, but some schools chose to reconstitute their class groups over the summer, which necessitated resampling of classes.

In Ireland, the PIRLS Teacher Questionnaire was administered to the fifth grade teacher at the time of testing, as in a significant number of cases, the fourth grade teacher from the previous year was not available. A supplementary national questionnaire was provided for fourth grade teachers from the previous year, where available, to capture some data from teachers' perspectives about engagement, strategies, and resources during periods of remote learning.

Schools were asked to facilitate administration of the PIRLS assessment by someone other than the class teacher, where possible. However, they also were advised that, if this was not practical due to COVID-19 regulations in the school, it was acceptable for the class teacher to administer the test.

## Suggested Readings

Department of Education and Skills. (2017). *National Strategy: Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life 2011-2020. Interim review: 2011-2016. New targets: 2017-2020*. Retrieved from <https://assets.gov.ie/24960/93c455d4440246cf8a701b9e0b0a2d65.pdf>

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A wide range of relevant documents are available for download from the websites of the Department of Education (<https://www.gov.ie/en/organisation/department-of-education/>), the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment ([www.ncca.ie](http://www.ncca.ie)), and the Educational Research Centre ([www.erc.ie](http://www.erc.ie)).

## References

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