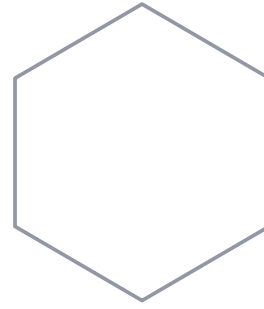




Department of
Education
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Leading Together for Excellence:

A TransformedED NI Strategy for Teacher Professional Learning

May 2026







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Ministerial Foreword

My vision of educational excellence is for an education system that truly transforms lives and inspires our children and young people, ignites their curiosity and opens their minds to the extraordinary opportunities that await them. Our mission is to equip every learner with the knowledge, understanding and skills they need not only to thrive in education, but to flourish in life.

At the heart of this ambition stands one constant: great teaching. No education system can exceed the quality of its teachers and no vision for transformation can be realised without investing deeply in those who make learning happen every single day. Teaching is the profession that creates all other professions. It is through our teachers that we change futures.

That is why the ongoing support and empowerment of the teaching workforce is central to my Department's [TransformED Strategy](#). Only by providing a comprehensive, career-long continuum of professional learning can we empower teachers to become the catalysts for change our children and young people deserve. Professional learning is not an add on; it is the engine that drives improvement, innovation and excellence in every high-quality education system.

I want to commend our teachers and leaders for their enthusiastic engagement with the professional learning opportunities already delivered through TransformED. Your dedication is the foundation on which we continue to build. We are aiming to ensure that meaningful, high-impact learning is available to teachers at every stage of their career from early entrants to our most experienced leaders.

This new strategy, *Leading Together for Excellence*, offers a clear, coherent vision for professional learning across the entire teacher journey. It builds on the commitments in the [TransformED Delivery Plan](#) and is strengthened by a powerful network of partners including schools, the Education Authority, Higher Education Institutions and valued organisations across the public, voluntary and private sectors.

As we go forward, your voice matters. I encourage you to engage with the consultation on this strategy and share your views on its detail. Your insights will help shape a system that supports every teacher and every learner.

Together, we can realise a system where empowered teachers lead transformative learning and where every child and young person can succeed.

Paul Givan, MLA
Minister of Education



CHAPTER 1

Introduction

“
The quality of an education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers.

McKinsey Report

”

The importance of teaching

This consultation invites your views on a renewed professional learning strategy for teachers in Northern Ireland: one that reflects the central, indispensable role of teaching in achieving excellence across our education system.

As set out in the TransformED Strategy, the quality of teaching is the single most important in school factor in influencing pupil outcomes, closely followed by the quality of school leadership.

Teachers make a difference. No matter the phase or school setting, it is the quality of teaching that can make the biggest difference to children’s learning and to their ultimate success in school. Essentially, every school is only as good or as great as its teachers.

This reality is echoed globally. McKinsey’s well known insight that “*the quality of an education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers*” continues to hold true. Across the world, education systems grapple with the same challenge: how to attract, develop and retain the exceptional teachers on whom educational success depends.

High-performing systems respond to this challenge with deliberate, sustained action. They recruit teachers from the strongest pool of graduates, open flexible and innovative pathways into teaching, and provide rigorous preparation focused on evidence-based classroom practice.

They also recognise that professional learning cannot stop at the point of qualification. Instead, high-quality professional learning is viewed as the foundation of an effective, confident and empowered workforce.

These systems ensure that teachers receive continuous, high-quality professional learning throughout their careers, enabling them to update their skills and knowledge, adapt, grow and excel in a changing educational landscape.



The Northern Ireland context

Northern Ireland must be no different. Our ambition is to make teaching here a high status, fulfilling profession that attracts talented individuals, supports their development and retains them through meaningful opportunities for growth.

This requires a comprehensive workforce strategy to address supply, recruitment and retention. It also requires a high-quality professional learning approach that ensures every teacher, at every stage, has access to world-class development. To achieve an excellent education system, we must invest in our teachers and ensure a culture that values continuous improvement.

In Northern Ireland, the publication of *Learning Leaders: A Strategy for Teacher Professional Learning* in 2016 was an important step forward. It set out a clear vision of empowered teachers identifying, prioritising and addressing their own professional learning needs. However, as highlighted by the Independent Review of Education, the absence of sustained investment and system wide coordination meant that this vision was not fully realised, and implementation of the strategy was piecemeal at best.

The context has, however, now changed. Sustained investment in high-quality professional development is a cornerstone of the Department's TransformED Strategy.

This new strategy, ***Leading Together for Excellence: A TransformED NI Strategy for Teacher Professional Learning***, builds on the foundations laid by *Learning Leaders* and translates the ambitions of TransformED into a coherent, deliverable plan for professional learning. Funding to support implementation of the strategy has been included as part of the overall TransformED Budget.

This strategy signals a renewed commitment to professional development in Northern Ireland and sets out how Northern Ireland will move:

- from fragmented provision to system wide coherence;
- from uneven opportunities to clear entitlement;
- from episodic training to sustained, career-long professional learning; and
- from isolated initiatives to aligned, strategic system improvement.

It sets out the Department's plans for:

- a new framework of professional standards to support and strengthen teaching;
- a dedicated Northern Ireland Centre for Educational Excellence and Improvement located within the Department to lead, coordinate and commission professional learning and leadership development across the education system;
- a new digital professional learning platform for all teachers;
- a programme of strategic investment and flagship projects that will deliver high-impact professional learning for all teachers; and
- enhanced induction, early career and leadership development.

Together, these reforms represent a step change in how professional learning is designed, delivered and sustained. A change that will align Northern Ireland with the world's highest performing education systems and place teacher development at the heart of system improvement.



CHAPTER 2

A vision for professional excellence

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Every teacher needs to improve, not because they are not good enough, but because they can be even better.

Dylan Wiliam

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Introduction

This chapter sets out the core vision that underpins this strategy and how a coherent, career-long approach to professional learning will support its achievement.

High-performing education systems share a common understanding: excellence in teaching is cultivated, not assumed. It is built progressively through structured learning opportunities, reflection, collaboration and sustained engagement with evidence.

This chapter, therefore, introduces the concept of professional learning as a continuum that supports teachers from entry into the profession through to experienced practice, leadership and system leadership.

A renewed vision for professional learning


Through TransformED and the associated investment, Northern Ireland is now positioned to move from aspiration to implementation and from fragmented provision to a coherent professional learning system that supports excellence across every phase, sector and career stage.

Across high-performing systems internationally, professional learning is treated as a strategic investment rather than an optional add on. Northern Ireland is now ready to join this international cohort of high-learning, high-performing systems.

Our vision:

To build an expert, confident teaching profession through high-quality, career-long professional learning that drives system excellence.

This vision represents a significant evolution in Northern Ireland’s approach to teacher professional learning. It acknowledges that teaching is a knowledge-rich, expert and intellectually demanding profession, and places professional learning at the heart of system improvement, not as a peripheral activity but as a foundational condition for educational excellence.



The vision reflects three core principles:

1. Professional learning is cumulative

Expertise grows progressively as teachers deepen pedagogical knowledge, strengthen subject understanding and refine practice in response to evidence and experience.

2. Professional learning must be connected to practice

Learning has the greatest impact when it is closely aligned to real classroom challenges, curriculum priorities and pupil outcomes.

3. Professional learning is a collective responsibility

Teachers must be supported as active agents in their own learning, within a system that provides clarity, coherence and equitable access.

Ultimately, the significance of this vision extends beyond professional learning. It is a commitment to the long-term strength and stability of the education system itself. By cultivating an expert, confident teaching profession, Northern Ireland positions itself to meet current challenges and anticipate future ones.

The professional learning continuum

Central to this strategy is the concept of a professional learning continuum: a structured, coherent pathway that supports teacher development across the full span of a career. High-performing systems such as Singapore, Estonia, Finland and Canada all have well defined professional learning continuums.

Rather than viewing professional learning as a series of isolated events or discrete programmes, the continuum frames teacher learning as an ongoing developmental journey. It signals that teaching is a dynamic, evolving profession in which growth is expected and supported.

The continuum also aims to demonstrate:

- how learning at one stage builds on previous development;
- how professional expertise can deepen over time; and
- how different forms of progression including leadership and specialist expertise are recognised and supported.

It also allows individuals to see how they can grow into leadership roles and makes leadership development deliberate rather than accidental. In addition, international evidence increasingly emphasises that teacher expertise should be recognised in multiple forms, not only through progression into school leadership. There is a clear trend toward establishing specialist advancement routes that allow expert teachers to progress without leaving the classroom.

Systems which offer specialist pathways, such as subject experts, mentors, instructional coaches and curriculum leaders are more successful in retaining highly skilled teachers; raising teaching quality; and strengthening system capacity. The continuum, therefore, recognises the development of a specialist pathway within the wider professional learning and leadership continuum.

Creating a recognised specialist pathway in Northern Ireland will:

- enable expert teachers to remain close to classroom practice;
- recognise deep professional expertise; and
- allow teachers to influence improvement beyond their own classrooms.

By recognising such roles, Northern Ireland will align itself with international evidence about what works in strengthening system performance. This is essential for a modern, high-performing education system.

Continuum of Teacher Professional Learning



Stages of the professional learning continuum

Initial Teacher Education

Initial Teacher Education represents the first stage of the professional learning continuum. It provides student teachers with the essential theoretical knowledge, subject understanding and practical classroom experience required for entry into the profession.

Professional learning at this stage focuses on developing foundational pedagogical knowledge, understanding how children learn, classroom management and building confidence in core teaching skills through supported practice.

Early career teacher

The early career phase typically spans the first three years of a teacher's career. It includes:

- **Induction** – a structured one-year programme that helps new teachers successfully transition from Initial Teacher Education into professional practice.
- **Early professional development** – a two-year period following induction that embeds career-long professional learning habits and strengthens core professional skills.

Professional learning during this phase is designed to ensure new teachers are well supported, well prepared and ready to progress confidently into experienced practice.



Experienced teacher

Experienced teachers continue to deepen their expertise as they refine their practice, respond to emerging educational research and adapt to changes in curriculum, pedagogy and technology. Professional learning at this stage focuses on strengthening subject knowledge, enhancing instructional practices, engaging with evidence informed approaches and contributing to school priorities. Teachers may also begin considering leadership pathways or taking on mentoring, coaching or specialist roles.

Leadership roles

Responsibilities and structures can vary across schools and, as such, the roles listed in the middle and senior leader sections below are illustrative rather than exhaustive.

Middle leaders

Middle leaders hold responsibilities that bridge classroom practice and whole school priorities. Roles include Heads of Department or Subject Leaders, Key Stage Coordinators, Special Educational Needs Coordinators and Literacy or Numeracy Coordinators.

Professional learning at this stage focuses on developing the skills required to lead teams, improve teaching and learning within subject or phase areas, analyse data, support colleagues and contribute to whole school improvement. Middle leaders play a critical role in translating strategic priorities into effective classroom practice.

Senior leader

Senior leaders contribute to the strategic and operational leadership of the school. This includes senior teachers, vice principals and others with whole school responsibilities. Their work spans curriculum leadership, safeguarding, professional learning, school improvement planning, staff development, and operational management. Professional learning at this stage strengthens strategic thinking, systems leadership, data informed decision making, and the ability to lead teams and drive whole school improvement with confidence and clarity.

School leader

School leaders hold overall accountability for the strategic, organisational and cultural direction of the school. They shape the school's vision and values, ensure high-quality teaching and learning, oversee governance and statutory duties, lead workforce development and manage resources and community relationships.

Professional learning at this stage focuses on advanced leadership competencies including organisational design, people management, governance, strategic planning, and leading change at scale across the whole school.

System leader

System leaders are experienced school leaders whose influence extends beyond their own setting. They support improvement across the wider education system by developing the capacity of other leaders and sharing effective practice. Professional learning for system leaders focuses on system level leadership, coaching and facilitation, equipping them to support and sustain improvement across the wider education system.



Specialist pathway roles

In a high-performing education system, the specialist pathway creates a clear progression for teachers who want to deepen their subject or pedagogical expertise rather than move into traditional leadership roles. It allows skilled practitioners to influence teaching quality beyond their own classrooms first as subject/pedagogical advisors, supporting colleagues within schools, and then as system level experts, shaping curriculum, professional learning and instructional practice across the whole system.

This pathway ensures that excellent teachers have the option of remaining close to the work of teaching while having meaningful career growth and a significant impact on pupil outcomes. For Northern Ireland to have a truly excellent education system, this must become a recognised pathway for teachers.

Features of high-quality professional learning

TransformED NI explicitly positions Northern Ireland as an evidence-based system, drawing from international best practice and research on what works in high-performing education systems.

Engaging teachers in high-quality professional learning is the most successful way to improve teacher effectiveness. However, not all professional development is equally effective and its quality often varies in practice. We also know that it is essential for teachers to become active agents in their own professional growth, rather than passive recipients of training.



Direct professional development

We now know much more about what constitutes effective professional development. Strong links between professional development and pupil outcomes are essential and it is vital that professional development should focus directly on classroom practice.

Effective professional development must:

- enhance teachers' knowledge and skills;
- lead to changes in classroom practice; and
- result in improved outcomes for pupils.

As set out in the diagram below, it is useful to distinguish between direct professional development which links clearly to improved practice and improved pupil outcomes, and more indirect professional development which contributes to improving the overall running of the school. Professional development should not be confused with administrative briefings or systems for teacher monitoring and appraisal.

What is direct professional development?



INDIRECT PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Links to pupil outcomes less clearly, and may contribute by helping to improve the running of a school by developing teachers in other ways. Indirect professional development could include, for example:

- leadership development;
- training in operational or procedural tasks;
- attending education conferences to increase awareness of new ideas; or
- statutory training around particular approaches.

OTHER ACTIVITIES

BRIEFING AND ADMINISTRATIVE INFORMATION EXCHANGE

There is an important place for briefing, administrative information exchange and statutory updates, however, this is not the same as professional development and should not be seen as part of the time or resource allocated to it.

APPRAISAL AND MONITORING OF TEACHING

Systems for appraisal and monitoring of teaching are necessary, and can help to determine starting points for professional development. In themselves, they are not direct teacher development processes and should not be seen as part of the time and resource allocated to them.

Care should be taken so that these systems do not impede effective professional development by reducing motivation, undermining trust or generating excessive workload.



Shared characteristics of effective professional learning

Across education systems, effective professional learning consistently demonstrates several shared characteristics. It is:

- evidence informed;
- sustained over time;
- collaborative and inquiry focused;
- supported by expert challenge and feedback; and
- closely connected to classroom practice and pupil outcomes.

Professional learning must also be context sensitive, recognising differences between phases, sectors and career stages. **Annex A** of this document sets out the features of effective professional learning in more detail.

Conclusion

This chapter establishes a clear direction for strengthening professional excellence across Northern Ireland's education system. It sets out a clear vision grounded in international evidence and shaped by the realities of teaching practice in Northern Ireland. This vision affirms a central principle of TransformED: investing in teachers is the most effective investment the system can make. When professional learning is structured, sustained and aligned to classroom practice, it strengthens teaching, builds leadership capacity and improves outcomes for every learner.

By defining professional learning as a coherent, career-long continuum, and by recognising multiple forms of professional growth, the strategy provides clarity, equity and purpose for teachers and leaders alike.



CHAPTER 3

Creating a new framework for professional standards

“
Professionalism is knowing how to do it, when to do it, and doing it.

Frank Tyger
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Introduction

Professional learning can only be effective when it is guided by a clear and shared understanding of what high-quality practice looks like. For teachers and leaders to improve with confidence, they need more than encouragement or aspiration; they need well defined professional standards that articulate excellence in concrete, practical and usable terms.

Across high-performing education systems, professional standards serve a critical function. They define the core professional knowledge, skills and judgement required to teach well; they provide a shared language for reflection and improvement; and they underpin coherent, career-long professional learning.

Where standards are clear, evidence informed and closely connected to classroom practice, professional learning becomes purposeful, cumulative and effective. Where they are vague, outdated or disconnected from practice, professional development risks becoming fragmented and inconsistent.


The demands placed on teachers and leaders in Northern Ireland have changed significantly over the past two decades. This chapter sets out the case for a renewed framework of professional standards for Northern Ireland, comprising modernised Teacher Competences and distinct Leadership Standards. Together, and alongside the new Curriculum Framework for Initial Teacher Education, these standards will form the spine of the professional learning system, ensuring clarity of expectations and coherence across career stages.

The role of professional competencies

Around the world, education systems are increasingly recognising that high-quality teaching depends on clearly articulated, evidence-informed professional competencies.

These competencies represent a combination of subject knowledge, pedagogical skill, professional judgement, values and behaviours that develop as teachers respond to emerging research, changing learner needs and wider societal expectations.

Well-designed competencies make practice explicit. They specify what effective teaching looks like, enabling teachers to:

- 
- understand expectations with clarity;
 - make informed decisions about their own development;
 - reflect precisely on the impact of their practice; and
 - engage meaningfully with professional learning.

For competencies to support improvement, they must be specific, practical, observable and measurable. Overly broad statements risk offering little guidance for reflection or development, while overly prescriptive frameworks can constrain professional judgement. The balance lies in standards that are clear enough to guide practice, yet flexible enough to respect teacher professionalism.

Professional competencies are most powerful when embedded within a coherent, career-long professional learning continuum. When teachers encounter consistent expectations developed progressively from Initial Teacher Education through early career support and into advanced practice, professional learning becomes connected and cumulative rather than episodic.

Leadership standards

Alongside teaching competencies, there is a compelling case for distinct and clearly defined leadership standards. Leadership in education requires a specialist set of capabilities that include strategic planning, organisational management and the ability to mobilise people and resources to drive improvement.

Effective leaders shape the conditions that allow great teaching to flourish; therefore, leadership standards must be sufficiently differentiated from teaching competencies to reflect the scope and weight of leadership responsibilities.

Separate leadership standards support the development of strong pathways into leadership roles, ensure coherence across leadership tiers and enable leaders at all levels to develop the expertise required to create high-performing schools.


Developing leadership standards alongside teacher competencies ensures that professional learning is coherent across roles and recognise the distinctive expertise required to lead learning effectively.

Northern Ireland context

In Northern Ireland, the Teacher Competences first articulated in GTCNI's [Teaching: The Reflective Profession](#) (2011) have played a valuable role in shaping teacher professionalism and provided a strong foundation for practice over the past decade. However, the expectations placed on teachers and the context in which they work have changed significantly.

To meet the challenges of the next decade, these competencies now require modernisation, revitalisation and alignment with current best practice and future system needs.

A renewed set of teacher competencies for Northern Ireland will sit at the heart of a modernised professional learning system. They will offer a clear, practical and accessible framework that supports teachers in strengthening their practice, reflecting on their impact and identifying development priorities grounded in the needs of their learners.



These competencies will underpin all Teacher Professional Learning Framework, ensuring it is coherent, cumulative and closely connected to improving outcomes for children and young people.

The revised competencies will be accompanied by new Leadership Standards for Northern Ireland, recognising that the expertise required to lead learning, manage people and resources, and drive strategic improvement differs from the competencies needed for classroom based teaching. These standards will clarify expectations for leaders at all levels.

Embedding teaching competencies across early career development, accredited programmes, school based learning and ongoing professional development, along with leadership standards at appropriate stages will create a coherent professional continuum.

This will help teachers and leaders build the knowledge, skills, dispositions and professional judgement required to contribute confidently to improvement within their school and across the wider system. It will reinforce professional autonomy, promote reflective and research informed practice, and ensure that all teachers regardless of career stage are supported to continuously refine their craft.

Ultimately, the new competence framework will become a shared professional language for Northern Ireland's education system, setting high expectations, strengthening professional identity and enabling teachers to demonstrate the impact of their learning on pupil outcomes.

Conclusion

This chapter sets out a clear direction for modernising Northern Ireland's professional standards framework. By working with GTCNI to renew the teacher competencies and introducing distinct leadership standards, the Department will establish a coherent, evidence informed foundation for professional growth across all career stages.

The revised framework will provide clarity of expectations, strengthen professional identity and ensure that professional learning is purposeful, cumulative and closely connected to practice. In doing so, it represents a critical step towards building a confident, expert workforce capable of driving sustained improvement across the education system.

Key commitments

We will:

- Work closely with GTCNI to **review and develop new Teacher Competences**, ensuring they are relevant, practical, evidence informed and aligned with the needs of today's learners.
- **Develop new Leadership Standards** that articulate the specific capabilities required to lead learning effectively and enable coherent leadership development across the system.



CHAPTER 4

Creating a coherent delivery infrastructure

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High-performing systems align policy priorities with the capacity and support required to deliver them.

OECD, Strong Performers and Successful Reformers in Education

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Introduction

High-performing education systems do not leave professional learning, leadership development, curriculum support or school improvement to chance. International evidence is clear: sustained improvement depends not only on strong policy decisions, but on the delivery infrastructure that translates those decisions into consistent, high-quality practice across schools.

Research from the OECD and other international system reviews shows that the most successful systems treat delivery infrastructure as a strategic priority. They ensure that curriculum implementation, professional learning, leadership development and school improvement are planned and delivered as an integrated whole, rather than as disconnected initiatives.

Countries including Ireland, Singapore, Finland, Estonia and Scotland have deliberately strengthened or reformed their delivery arrangements to reduce fragmentation, align workforce development with curriculum reform, and clarify accountability for impact. These reforms have helped ensure that policy intent reaches classrooms at scale and benefits all learners.

By contrast, where delivery responsibilities are dispersed across multiple organisations, improvement efforts tend to be slower, less consistent and more likely to deepen inequality. In such systems, even well-designed policies struggle to translate into widespread changes in teaching practice.

Northern Ireland's current delivery arrangements reflect many of these risks. Without an integrated mechanism to coordinate curriculum, professional learning, leadership development and school improvement, system wide impact remains difficult to achieve.

To strengthen professional learning and leadership development in Northern Ireland, it is therefore not enough to focus solely on *what* is provided. Equal attention must be given to *how* provision is organised, coordinated and aligned with curriculum implementation and system improvement. This chapter sets out the Department's proposals for a new Centre for Educational Excellence and Improvement within the Department of Education.



The case for change

Historically, the professional learning landscape in Northern Ireland has been characterised by under investment, complexity and fragmentation. There has been no single body with responsibility for coordinating professional learning across the career continuum or critically for ensuring alignment with curriculum priorities.

As highlighted earlier, *Learning Leaders* was constrained by limited funding, significantly restricting its reach and impact. More broadly, there was no earmarked funding enabling schools to commission high-quality professional learning matched to their needs. Investment in sustained, subject-specific development has also been extremely limited in the years following the dissolution of the Curriculum Advisory and Support Service (CASS) within the Education and Library Boards.

This is a particularly significant gap as sustained improvement in teaching quality depends on teachers developing deep subject knowledge and subject-specific pedagogy over time. Without this, curriculum intent is diluted, knowledge progression becomes insecure and inequality widens as pupils' access to high-quality teaching varies between schools.

Effective subject-specific professional learning supports teachers to:

- teach knowledge thoroughly, so that new learning builds securely on prior understanding;
- teach rigorously, informed by current research and curriculum thinking; and
- teach meaningfully, with confidence, clarity and intellectual engagement.

Where such support is absent, professional development risks becoming generic, disconnected from curriculum goals and ineffective in improving practice.

What the evidence tells us

Taken together, recent system reviews have reached a consistent conclusion – curriculum reform, professional learning, leadership development and systematic improvement of the education system cannot succeed where responsibility is fragmented, subject expertise is thinly spread, and no single body holds system wide responsibility for coherence, quality and impact.

The Independent Review of Education identified significant weaknesses in the existing approach to professional development in Northern Ireland. It found that funding arrangements, responsibilities and impact were difficult to understand precisely because provision was spread across multiple public, private and higher education providers, with limited coordination and no clear system ownership.

For example, the Education Authority provides a range of professional learning opportunities, alongside a number of the sectoral bodies. Further courses are also available from local Higher Education providers, as well as from private organisations.



The Independent Review concluded that this fragmentation made it difficult to:

- set system expectations for induction and continuing professional development;
- evaluate quality and impact; and
- ensure value for money and equity of access.

The Review recommended a more formal, structured approach to professional development, including:

- clear system standards for induction and ongoing learning;
- defined professional learning policies in every educational institution;
- a centralised funding mechanism linked to those policies;
- greater autonomy for schools to commission quality assured provision;
- structured collaboration between schools; and
- robust monitoring of impact on practice and outcomes.

The Review also emphasised that curriculum advice and support had suffered from long-term disinvestment. It recommended that significant resources be directed towards keeping the curriculum under review, responding to practitioner and learner feedback and ensuring alignment with social, economic and technological change. It proposed that curriculum responsibilities be located within a properly resourced central body with the capacity both to develop guidance and support schools.

These findings were reinforced by Lucy Crehan's *Strategic Review of the Northern Ireland Curriculum*, which highlighted the loss of subject-specific support following the dissolution of CASS in 2015. Stakeholders consistently reported that the reduction in curriculum and advisory capacity left schools without the specialist guidance required to implement the curriculum effectively.

While the Education Authority maintains a core professional learning offer, reduced capacity within the School Development Service has necessarily prioritised targeted support, including work with schools identified through inspection. This has limited the extent of system-wide curriculum and pedagogical support that can be provided at scale.

Crucially, the Strategic Review of the Northern Ireland Curriculum made clear that curriculum reform and professional development are inseparable. It emphasised that:

- teachers need clear, curriculum specific guidance on what to teach and how knowledge should be sequenced;
- professional learning must be tightly aligned to curriculum reform;
- subject-specific support is essential; and
- professional development must be sustained, coherent and embedded over time.

The Review explicitly warned that curriculum reform will not succeed unless it is accompanied by parallel investment in professional learning.



International lessons: why coordination matters

High-performing systems have responded to these challenges by establishing single, clearly mandated centres that integrate curriculum, professional learning and system improvement:

- Singapore locates curriculum design, teacher development and leadership learning within a tightly aligned ecosystem centred on the National Institute of Education and the Academy of Singapore Teachers, ensuring coherence from policy to classroom.
- Ontario combines curriculum reform with centrally coordinated professional learning through system wide networks and evidence informed improvement cycles.
- Scotland assigns responsibility for curriculum development and national professional learning to Education Scotland, providing a single point of coherence across reform, support and improvement.
- England has strengthened coherence by linking curriculum reform with evidence-based professional learning through national bodies such as the Education Endowment Foundation.

These systems differ in structure but share a common design principle: clear system leadership, aligned commissioning and sustained professional learning rooted in curriculum intent.

Why a single coordinating centre is necessary

TransformED has already begun to change the professional learning landscape. Key programmes such as the Teacher Professional Learning Fund, enhanced induction, partnerships with the Chartered College of Teaching, enhanced access to education research through Making Best Practice Common Practice and online science of learning programmes are important advances.

However, without a coherent delivery infrastructure, fragmentation and long-term sustainability remain significant risks. International evidence is clear: multiple agencies, unaligned funding streams and episodic initiatives undermine impact.

Northern Ireland now requires a single system level body to:

- support delivery and implementation of the new Northern Ireland curriculum through appropriate whole school and subject-specific professional development, and high-quality resources;
- ensure professional learning is coherent across all career stages;
- ensure clear strategic direction and coherence, aligned with TransformED; and
- move from isolated initiatives to a genuinely system wide approach.

Northern Ireland Centre for Educational Excellence and Improvement

It is, therefore, the Department's intention to establish a Northern Ireland Centre for Educational Excellence and Improvement, located within the Department. Its core function will be to work with the education system to improve learning, teaching focusing on curriculum, leadership and professional learning.



The new centre will act as the system level engine for improvement by providing strategic direction, central coordination and intelligent commissioning.

Its proposed system-level responsibilities include:

- curriculum design, guidance, resourcing and improvement;
- supporting professional learning and leadership across the career continuum;
- building system capacity for improvement and equity;
- supporting effective teaching and learning;
- providing evidence-based advice to Ministers; and
- facilitating system-level collaboration and providing system leadership across education.

Delivery partners such as CCEA and the Education Authority will continue to play important roles, but within a clearer delivery structure in which the new Centre sets priorities, both delivers and commissions services and quality assures impact.

Establishing a single centre brings significant strategic and operational benefits:

- **System coherence:** Aligns curriculum reform, professional learning, leadership development and system-wide improvement into a single, mutually reinforcing system rather than a set of disconnected initiatives.
- **Clarity of direction:** Provides a clear centre for setting priorities, expectations and standards, reducing confusion or uncertainty for schools and practitioners.
- **Improved quality and consistency:** Enables stronger commissioning, quality assurance and evaluation, ensuring that professional development and support are consistently high-quality and evidence informed.
- **Reduced fragmentation and duplication:** Brings together work currently spread across multiple organisations, simplifying structures and improving efficiency.
- **Better use of resources:** Supports strategic investment based on impact and need, rather than historical patterns or isolated bids.
- **Stronger link between policy and practice:** Ensures that reform intentions translate into classroom practice through aligned curriculum guidance, professional learning and school support.
- **Enhanced accountability and impact:** Makes it possible to track outcomes across the system and refine approaches based on evidence.
- **Stronger professional trust:** Creates a transparent, coherent system that supports schools and teachers rather than overwhelming them with competing initiatives.

The Centre for Educational Excellence and Improvement will provide the missing connective tissue in the Northern Ireland education system. By coordinating curriculum, professional learning, leadership development and improvement through a single, strategically led body, the Department intends to strengthen delivery, improve outcomes and ensure that TransformED is realised consistently and sustainably across all school sectors. The Department is currently carrying out detailed scoping, design and planning work for the new Centre.



A unified digital learning platform

Coherence in professional learning must also be reflected in how it is accessed and experienced. To support this, the Department has commissioned the Education Authority to procure a single digital teacher professional learning platform.

The platform will provide a unified environment that brings together the full landscape of professional learning in one coherent, accessible space. It will enable teachers to engage in a wide range of online learning opportunities, from large-scale system wide programmes to smaller, targeted sessions for subject specialists, emerging leaders and school based teams. Opportunities will be clearly organised, visible and easy to access through system wide scheduling. The platform will support equity across the system, ensuring that all teachers regardless of school size or location can access high-quality professional learning.

A core feature of the platform will be a comprehensive digital record of each teacher's professional learning journey. This personal learning passport will allow teachers to record, access and complete professional learning online, providing a clear, accurate and easily retrievable record over time. It will support reflection, planning of next steps and sustained engagement in professional growth.

The platform will also strengthen collaboration across schools. It will enable schools to create, curate and share professional learning resources, including unit plans, teaching materials, exemplar videos and leadership tools, extending system wide collaboration and collective expertise.

Built in discussion forums and peer networks will support professional dialogue beyond individual schools. Teachers will be able to connect within subject communities, mentoring relationships, Area Learning Communities, shared education partnerships and collaborative clusters.

As Northern Ireland advances the TransformED agenda, this platform will provide a modern, flexible and intuitive space for teachers to develop the knowledge, skills and confidence needed to shape the future of education.



Conclusion

Successful implementation of the TransformED ambitions regarding professional learning requires infrastructure capable of delivering reform in classrooms. The proposed establishment of a Northern Ireland Centre for Educational Excellence and Improvement, supported by a unified digital professional learning platform, will fundamentally strengthen the system's capacity to deliver change.

Together, these reforms create the conditions in which system-wide improvement of teaching and learning, curriculum reform, professional learning and leadership development are no longer pursued in parallel, but are deliberately aligned, mutually reinforcing and focused on impact.

This infrastructure will provide clarity of direction, consistency of support and equity of access for schools and teachers across all phases and sectors. It will ensure that professional learning is rooted in curriculum purpose, strengthened by subject-specific expertise and sustained over time.

This infrastructure is not an end in itself. It is the enabling foundation of a confident, expert and connected profession, capable of continuous improvement and collective leadership. By putting the right delivery structures in place now, Northern Ireland sets the conditions for TransformED to be realised consistently, coherently and sustainably for the long term.

Key commitments

We will:

- Establish the **Northern Ireland Centre for Educational Excellence and Improvement** to provide clear system leadership for curriculum, professional learning and leadership development.
- Ensure **professional learning is coherently aligned to curriculum reform**, statutory assessment arrangements and system-wide priorities for improvement.
- **Commission and quality assure subject-specific and career stage professional learning**, ensuring sustained, evidence-informed provision.
- Provide a **unified digital professional learning platform** that improves access, equity and collaboration.
- Reduce fragmentation by **clarifying roles, responsibilities and accountability** for professional learning across the education system.

CHAPTER 5

System level investment: collaboration, continuity and choice

Better than a thousand days of diligent study is one day with a great teacher.

Japanese proverb

Introduction

High-performing education systems invest deliberately in professional learning as a core driver of improvement. They do so not through isolated initiatives or short term programmes, but by building an ecosystem for professional learning that is coherent, well resourced and responsive to the needs of schools, teachers and learners.

Professional learning is most effective when it combines school level autonomy with system level coherence, ensuring that investment, programme design and curriculum and improvement priorities are aligned.

TransformED established a clear commitment to strengthening teacher professional learning across Northern Ireland. This chapter sets out how that commitment is now being delivered in practice. It demonstrates the significant progress already made, explains how individual projects fit within a wider professional learning ecosystem, and sets out how the system will continue to evolve to support sustained improvement in teaching and learning.

The TransformED approach to professional learning

The TransformED Strategy recognised that the professional learning landscape in Northern Ireland required both renewed investment and greater coherence. It committed to building a system that provides:

- secure, multi year funding directly to schools to respond to identified needs;
- centrally commissioned, high-quality professional learning aligned with system priorities;
- stronger links between research and classroom practice;
- subject-specific and curriculum focused professional development; and
- collaborative professional learning communities within and across schools.

This twin approach of school led professional development, alongside centrally commissioned programmes focussed on whole system priorities, underpins all professional learning investment under TransformED.



Programmes delivered through TransformED

Significant progress has already been made in establishing the foundations of a stronger professional learning system.

The Teacher Professional Learning (TPL) Fund

The TPL Fund is a core commitment in TransformED, providing £31 million of dedicated, ring fenced funding to every grant aided school over a three-year period from 2025–26 to 2027–28. This funding is intended to support sustained, high-quality professional learning that improves teaching quality and, in turn, pupil outcomes.

The Fund is intended to empower schools while contributing to a coherent system wide approach to teacher professional learning under TransformED. Each school receives an annual allocation calculated on a per teacher basis, giving schools certainty and flexibility to plan professional learning strategically over time rather than relying on short term or ad hoc provision. Schools are expected to align use of the fund directly to their School Development Plan and system priorities, ensuring professional learning is purposeful, coherent and impactful.

Making Best Practice, Common Practice

The Making Best Practice, Common Practice Programme aims to strengthen the connection between research and practice and to build cumulative professional knowledge across the system. This programme has funded over 100 schools to host 52 research informed conferences; a monthly Science of Learning newsletter; and a quarterly education research publication, which synthesises emerging insights for practitioners.

Science of Learning

TransformED placed particular emphasis on strengthening teachers' understanding of how pupils learn. This has been taken forward through a suite of evidence informed programmes, including the Science of Learning Teacher CPD Academy for post primary schools, offering interactive, on demand courses grounded in cognitive science and the Classroom Excellence Programme, delivered in partnership with Evidence Based Education, providing 300 primary schools with access to research, tools and resources to enhance classroom practice.

Partnerships to strengthen professional capital

A new partnership with the Chartered College of Teaching provides teachers and classroom assistants with access to evidence informed professional learning programmes. This includes 100 bursaries for teachers and 100 bursaries for classroom assistants, supporting professional growth, recognition and access to high-quality learning.



Towards a coherent professional learning ecosystem

While each of these programmes delivers impact individually, under TransformED, professional learning is being shaped through a deliberate combination of:

- School level funding: enabling schools to identify priorities and commission professional learning that meets local needs.
- Centrally commissioned programmes: ensuring system priorities such as Special Education Needs and inclusion, curriculum reform, literacy, numeracy and the effective use of digital technology, notably artificial intelligence, are supported at scale.
- Subject-specific and curriculum aligned development: which will provide teachers with the depth of subject knowledge and pedagogy required to implement the reformed Northern Ireland curriculum with confidence.
- Research informed practice embedding engagement with evidence as a normal feature of professional learning.
- Professional learning communities: supporting collaboration within and across schools to share expertise, develop consistency and reduce isolation.

This integrated model reflects international best practice, ensuring that professional learning is sustained, cumulative and focused on classroom impact rather than fragmented or episodic.

Looking ahead, we will continue to build on and invest in these programmes, ensuring they remain responsive to the evolving needs of schools, teachers and learners. This will include expanding and refining provision to address emerging priorities such as inclusion, curriculum reform, digital technology and artificial intelligence, as well as adapting to new evidence and changing classroom contexts.

Through sustained investment and continuous improvement, we will ensure that professional learning remains relevant, forward looking and capable of supporting high-quality teaching across the system.

Conclusion

TransformED is already reshaping the professional learning landscape in Northern Ireland. Through sustained investment, evidence informed commissioning and strengthened school level autonomy, the system is moving decisively away from fragmentation towards coherence.

The projects set out in this chapter are not isolated programmes. Together, they form the foundations of a strong professional learning ecosystem: one that supports teachers throughout their careers, aligns professional learning with curriculum reform, and builds collective expertise across the system.

By continuing to develop this ecosystem combining school led decision making with clear system direction Northern Ireland is creating the conditions in which professional learning becomes both a driver of improvement and a defining feature of a confident, expert and connected teaching profession.

Key commitments

We will:

- **Sustain multi-year investment in school led professional learning** through the Teacher Professional Learning Fund.
- **Pilot an appropriate endorsement process** to provide assurance to schools that external professional learning provision is of a suitable quality.
- Continue to **commission high-quality, evidence informed professional learning aligned to system priorities**, particularly to support curriculum reform and assessment practice.
- Pilot investment in the **renewal and creation of subject focused professional learning** communities to support subject-specific professional practice.
- Provide **coaching and mentoring opportunities** for teachers at all stages of their career.
- **Enhance Special Education Needs related professional learning** for all teachers.
- **Strengthen professional learning in digital technologies**, including the effective and ethical use of artificial intelligence in teaching and learning.
- **Improve access to education research** for teachers at all stages of their career.
- Pilot investment in supporting groups of schools to **create or further embed collaborative professional learning communities**.



CHAPTER 6

Initial Teacher Education

High-performing systems ensure that beginning teachers are well prepared from day one, rather than relying on later remediation.

OECD, Building a high-quality teaching profession

Introduction

Initial Teacher Education forms the foundation of teacher quality, professional confidence and long-term workforce sustainability. The effectiveness of an education system depends to a significant degree on how well it prepares new teachers to enter classrooms equipped with the essential knowledge, skills and professional judgement required to deliver high-quality teaching from the outset.

Northern Ireland has a strong tradition of providing high-quality Initial Teacher Education, attracting high-performing school leavers and graduates to teaching, and preparing them for the intellectual and professional demands of teaching.


International evidence from the OECD consistently identifies teacher preparation as a critical lever for educational improvement. High-performing systems place strong emphasis on rigorous, research-informed initial preparation; clarity about what beginning teachers should know and be able to do; and alignment between Initial Teacher Education, induction and ongoing professional learning. In these systems, Initial Teacher Education is not viewed as a standalone phase, but as the first stage of a coherent professional learning continuum.

This chapter sets out how Initial Teacher Education in Northern Ireland will be further strengthened to meet current and future needs. It focuses on ensuring consistency of entitlement for all student teachers, addressing subject and sector workforce challenges, embedding evidence-informed practice and strengthening alignment with induction and early career development.

Strengths of the current Initial Teacher Education system

Initial Teacher Education in Northern Ireland is underpinned by a strong partnership between Higher Education Institutions, schools and the Department of Education. Programmes draw on:

- the theory and practice of teaching;
- current research and evidence informed pedagogy;

- 
- the Northern Ireland Teacher Competences;
 - the Northern Ireland Curriculum; and
 - the Department’s wider policy framework.

Provision is subject to university quality assurance processes and formal approval by the Department of Education.

A core entitlement for all student teachers

OECD research is clear that even strong systems must continually adapt. Maintaining excellence requires explicit system-level clarity about core expectations. High-performing systems increasingly articulate a clear core curriculum or entitlement for Initial Teacher Education, ensuring consistency while preserving institutional autonomy. The aim is that every beginning teacher is guaranteed access to a defined body of essential knowledge and practice.

In responding directly to this need, a key commitment within the TransformED Strategy is the development of a core content Framework for Initial Teacher Education. The [Northern Ireland Curriculum Framework for Initial Teacher Education](#) was published in April 2026 following targeted consultation with key stakeholders.


Its purpose is to:

- Ensure coherence and consistency of core entitlement across all Initial Teacher Education courses in Northern Ireland.
- Strengthen classroom readiness through explicit, evidence-informed practice.
- Align Initial Teacher Education with wider system reform, including curriculum and assessment developments.
- Establish the foundation for a clear development continuum from Initial Teacher Education through induction and early career to career-long learning.

The new framework defines specific learning goals, key knowledge for students and practice expectations that all beginning teachers in Northern Ireland should develop during Initial Teacher Education, organised across five domains:

- A. Learning and development;
- B. Pedagogy and assessment;
- C. Curriculum;
- D. Classroom environment and positive behaviour;
- E. The teacher as a professional.

By embedding these foundations consistently across providers in Northern Ireland, we aim to strengthen classroom readiness, professional confidence and system coherence, while preserving the autonomy of Initial Teacher Education providers to enrich and extend provision beyond the core. Initial Teacher Education Providers have been asked to implement the framework in full by the 2028–29 academic year.



The transition from Initial Teacher Education into teaching is a high risk point. Systems that perform best align Initial Teacher Education content with induction expectations; maintain strong partnerships between universities, employing authorities and schools and treat early career development as a continuation, not a restart. It will, therefore, be important to ensure continued and greater collaboration between Initial Teacher Education providers, the Education Authority and schools in the induction phase.

Bursary scheme

In recent years there have been increasing challenges with teacher recruitment at school level in certain subjects, mirrored by a drop in application rates at Initial Teacher Education level. Supply remains strong at pre-school and primary level but there have been increasing challenges in certain post-primary subjects.

Evidence shows that shortages are rarely resolved through recruitment campaigns alone; instead, targeted incentives should be coupled with strong preparation, early support and clear career pathways.

As part of the TransformED Programme, the recently launched Initial Teacher Education Bursary Scheme pilot was developed to increase applications and uptake in those post-primary subjects experiencing the most significant recruitment and application shortages, namely Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry, ICT, Technology & Design and across the Irish-medium sector.

The Department will keep this scheme under review, evaluating its effectiveness and the need for extension to other post-primary subjects. As this scheme develops, its success will be assessed not only by application numbers, but by completion rates, entry to the profession, deployment into schools and retention beyond the early career phase.

Irish-medium Initial Teacher Education

The Irish-medium sector experiences distinct and persistent workforce challenges, particularly at post primary level. The introduction of the Initial Teacher Education Bursary Scheme has been broadly welcomed. However, challenges remain for the Irish-medium sector.

Currently Irish-medium post-primary postgraduate students attend either Queen's or Ulster Universities for their subject choice, followed by St Mary's University College for specific preparation to teach in the Irish-medium sector. This model was developed as a response to teacher shortages in the Irish-medium sector. The sector, however, continues to experience challenges in successfully attracting a broad range of subject teachers.

Since commencing Irish-medium Initial Teacher Education provision, St Mary's University College has honed its expertise in preparing students to teach in the sector, offering its own undergraduate and postgraduate routes at primary level, with strong cohorts graduating each year. However, there is concern that these graduates are not translating into increased numbers of teachers in the sector.

It is clear more consideration is needed to ensure that the sector is an attractive option for graduate teachers and the necessary teaching staff are recruited across a broad range of subjects at post-primary level.



Conclusion

Initial Teacher Education is a decisive investment in the future quality and stability of the teaching profession. Northern Ireland's Initial Teacher Education system is a significant strength, but it must continue to evolve in response to workforce pressures and growing expectations of classroom practice.

By clarifying core entitlement through the new curriculum framework for Initial Teacher Education, grounding preparation firmly in evidence, addressing subject and sector needs and aligning Initial Teacher Education with induction and early career development, this chapter sets a clear direction for sustained improvement.

It also positions Initial Teacher Education not as an isolated phase, but as the first step in a coherent, career-long journey of professional learning ensuring that every teacher enters the classroom confident, capable and well prepared to support all learners.

Key commitments

We will:

- **Implement the new Northern Ireland Curriculum Framework for Initial Teacher Education** to guarantee a clear core entitlement for all student teachers, while retaining institutional autonomy to enrich provision.
- Undertake a comprehensive **review of the outworkings of Initial Teacher Education provision for the Irish-medium sector**, examining graduate progression, subject coverage and retention, and use the findings to inform future pathways and supports.
- **Evaluate the impact of the Initial Teacher Education Bursary Scheme**, using robust evidence to inform decisions on subject priorities, scale and long-term sustainability.
- **Strengthen formal collaboration between Higher Education Institutions, the Department, the Education Authority and schools**, improving alignment between Initial Teacher Education, induction and early professional development.



CHAPTER 7

Early Career Teachers

“
Being a new teacher is like trying to fly an airplane while building it.

Rick Smith

”

Introduction

Early career teachers are essential to the sustainability, renewal and improvement of the education system. As experienced teachers progress into leadership, specialist roles or leave the profession, the aim is that early career teachers replenish the workforce and bring with them contemporary pedagogical knowledge, grounded in research-informed Initial Teacher Education. Ensuring that new teachers are supported to thrive is a strategic imperative for educational quality, equity and workforce stability.

The first three to four years of teaching are critical in shaping a teacher’s sense of efficacy, professional identity and long-term commitment to the profession. Attrition rates are highest during this period, particularly where induction is inconsistent, mentorship is under-resourced or professional expectations are poorly scaffolded.


Conversely, high-quality induction and early career professional development are associated with improved teacher confidence, classroom effectiveness, pupil outcomes and retention.

Day and Shanks, in *Mind the Gap: Teacher Induction in Scotland*, capture the significance of this phase powerfully: “The way that teachers are supported at the beginning and throughout their careers could be regarded as a proxy measure for how society values education and teachers.”

This chapter sets out a strengthened, more coherent approach to supporting early career teachers in Northern Ireland, from induction through early professional development, ensuring that every newly qualified teacher benefits from consistent, high-quality support regardless of school setting or sector.

Teacher induction

A comprehensive and well-structured induction programme is internationally recognised as a cornerstone of effective entry into the teaching profession. Induction bridges the transition from Initial Teacher Education to sustained professional practice, supporting early career teachers to apply theory in complex classroom settings, develop effective behaviour management, refine instructional practice and integrate confidently into school communities.



High-performing systems treat induction not as an optional entitlement, but as a core component of professional formation. Effective induction is characterised by:

- structured mentoring by trained and supported colleagues;
- reduced isolation through collaborative professional learning;
- clear professional standards and expectations; and
- protected time for reflection, observation and feedback.

Induction in Northern Ireland

In Northern Ireland, induction is currently delivered through a combination of:

- school-based support, led by teacher tutors who provide mentoring, observation and professional guidance; and
- external directed professional learning, designed to support development in both teaching quality and classroom management.

The Department's [Review of the Teacher Induction Programme in Northern Ireland](#) (June 2025) had strongly endorsed the value of induction but identified significant variability in experience and quality across schools.

Key messages from the review included:

- inconsistency in access to induction and mentoring;
- wide variation in the capacity, training and time allocation for Teacher Tutors;
- lack of clarity around core, compulsory entitlement; and
- limited alignment between induction and subsequent early professional development

The review concluded that without greater coherence and clearer system-level expectations, Northern Ireland risks losing early career teachers.


As part of the TransformED Programme, the Department, working closely with the Education Authority, introduced an enhanced [Teacher Induction Programme](#) in the 2025–26 academic year. This enhanced offer reflects emerging research and identified need, with a particular focus on literacy and numeracy, the science of learning, Special Educational Needs and improvement-focused engagement with the Education and Training Inspectorate. This is an important first step.

Strengthening the induction framework

Unlike many other jurisdictions, teacher induction in Northern Ireland is not currently a mandatory component of the teacher professional learning journey. Given the pivotal importance of this phase, induction must become a universal and guaranteed entitlement.

Making induction mandatory will:

- ensure consistent support for all newly qualified teachers;
- reinforce professional standards from the point of entry;

- 
- strengthen retention and workforce stability; and
 - signal the value placed on teaching as a profession

Mandatory induction will include:

- agreed core content aligned to system priorities;
- a structured online training programme;
- defined mentoring and observation expectations; and
- enhanced training and support for teacher tutors.

Teacher tutors play a critical role in shaping early career teachers' confidence and competence. The enhanced induction programme represents a significant step forward in recognising this contribution. Over the next three years, support for teacher tutors will also be further expanded, including clearer expectations and improved professional learning.

Preparing teachers for the Northern Ireland context

Context-specific preparation is critically important. Teachers trained in different jurisdictions require structured support to adapt to the Northern Ireland context.

For student teachers who complete Initial Teacher Education through institutions or routes outside of Northern Ireland, it is essential that a specific element of induction is developed that builds systematically on their prior learning and addresses the Northern Ireland Curriculum; assessment and accountability arrangements; statutory frameworks, including for Special Educational Needs; and the professional and cultural context of schools in Northern Ireland. This will ensure support for a smoother transition into employment, reducing early career attrition.

Early professional development

Completion of induction marks an important milestone, but it is not the end of the early career journey. International evidence shows that professional growth during years two and three of teaching remains highly dependent on structured support, access to expertise and purposeful professional learning.

The Review of the Teacher Induction Programme highlighted that current early professional development provision beyond induction is limited in scope, coherence and impact, particularly in relation to the directed learning element. This creates a sharp drop-off in structured support at precisely the point when many teachers are consolidating practice, managing increased responsibility and considering their long-term future in teaching.

To address this, early professional development must be reimagined as a distinct and purposeful phase of professional learning, aligned with induction and clearly focused on:

- deepening instructional expertise;
- inclusive practice and Special Educational Needs;
- assessment for learning;
- behaviour and classroom culture; and
- professional confidence and wellbeing.



Conclusion

Supporting early career teachers is one of the most powerful levers available to improve educational outcomes, retain talented professionals and build long-term system capacity. High-quality induction and early professional development are essential infrastructure for a strong teaching profession.

By making induction mandatory, strengthening mentoring and extending structured support beyond the first year of teaching, Northern Ireland will signal its commitment to valuing early career teachers and securing a high-quality education system for the future.

This chapter sets out a clear direction of travel: from variability to coherence, from optional provision to guaranteed entitlement and from short-term one-year induction to sustained multi-year early career development.

Key commitments

We will:

- **Make induction a mandatory requirement** for all newly qualified teachers in Northern Ireland, as a condition of registration, ensuring consistent entitlement and support.
- Agree and implement **compulsory core content for the induction programme**, aligned with system priorities, including a mandatory, high-quality online training programme.
- Further **expand and strengthen the directed learning element of induction**, informed by Education and Training Inspectorate evaluation, to ensure it is structured, coherent and underpinned by research-informed practice.
- Ensure **structured support for early career teachers educated through institutions or routes outside of Northern Ireland**, embedding essential system knowledge within the induction programme, particularly in relation to the Northern Ireland curriculum and statutory frameworks.
- **Enhance training, guidance and professional recognition for teacher tutors**, ensuring they are equipped, supported and valued as expert mentors.
- Undertake a **comprehensive review and redesign of early professional development**, developing a new, coherent professional learning programme for teachers following induction.



CHAPTER 8

Leadership

“
*Schools rarely outperform
their leaders.*

Michael Fullan
”

Introduction

Effective school leadership is one of the most powerful levers for improving educational quality and equity. Leadership is second only to classroom teaching in its impact on pupil outcomes, shaping not only what happens in classrooms but also the culture, conditions and professional learning that enable teachers and pupils to thrive. No school is more effective than the quality of its leadership.

High-performing education systems invest deliberately and systematically in leadership development across the career continuum. They identify leadership potential early, provide structured preparation for leadership roles and sustain ongoing professional learning for leaders at every stage. Leadership is not treated as an individual accomplishment, but as a system capacity to be grown, supported and renewed over time.


Leadership development in Northern Ireland has been fragmented and limited. TransformED recognised leadership as central to improving outcomes across the education system and set out a series of commitments to strengthen leadership at all stages.

This chapter aims to build on those commitments and set out a coherent, inclusive and career-long approach to leadership development in Northern Ireland that supports aspiring leaders, develops those currently in role and enables leaders to contribute beyond their own schools.

Principles of effective leadership development

Several features characterise effective leadership development systems:

- a clear and progressive leadership pathway;
- preparation aligned to the real demands of leadership roles;
- emphasis on instructional and pedagogical leadership;
- sustained professional learning rather than one off programmes;
- coaching, mentoring and peer networks; and
- opportunities for leaders to contribute to system improvement.



Effective school leaders combine vision and values with practical capability. They lead people, teaching and learning, improvement and change. They demonstrate self awareness, emotional intelligence and resilience; communicate purpose clearly; use evidence to inform decisions; and create cultures of trust, collaboration and high expectations.

Leadership development provision must therefore go beyond technical compliance and focus on developing professional judgement, ethical leadership and adaptive expertise.

Middle leaders

Middle leaders play a pivotal role in connecting strategic direction with classroom practice. International evidence indicates that effective middle leadership strengthens subject pedagogy, improves curriculum coherence and builds collective teacher efficacy.

The Department has carried out a desktop review of current provision in Northern Ireland which indicates strong alignment with approaches in comparable jurisdictions. However, there is scope to extend and deepen support to reflect the evolving complexity of middle leadership roles. Potential enhancements include:

- flexible, self directed learning modules;
- specialist pathways focusing on leading pedagogy and subject-specific improvement;
- structured coaching and mentoring responsive to role specific challenges;
- formal support for postgraduate and accredited leadership study; and
- providing differentiated provision for new, aspiring and experienced middle leaders.

These enhancements will be considered as part of the development of a revised middle leader professional learning programme fulfilling the commitments made under TransformED.


Senior leaders and principals

Northern Ireland has not had a professional qualification to prepare newly appointed and aspiring leaders for the role of Principal since 2017–18. The absence of such structured preparation for headship increases role stress, limits effectiveness in the early years of leadership and can negatively affect retention.

TransformED committed to piloting a replacement for the former Professional Qualification for Headship (PQH) during the 2026/27 academic year and this work will now progress at pace following a recent procurement exercise to appoint a new provider.

This new qualification will reflect:

- the reality of contemporary school leadership;
- the increasing complexity of the Principal role;
- the need for strong instructional and pedagogical leadership;
- values based and ethical leadership;
- the operational and administrative know how to lead and manage their schools effectively; and
- the need for system awareness and outward facing leadership



It must also acknowledge that a cohort of principals has been appointed in the intervening years without access to a dedicated preparation programme. Previously, PQH included a pathway for experienced Principals, recognising their prior learning while strengthening leadership capability. A similar, differentiated approach should be considered for the new qualification.

Once established and embedded, consideration will be given to whether the replacement PQH or a professionally recognised equivalent qualification should become a mandatory requirement for appointment to principalship. While international practice varies, many high-performing systems require formal leadership preparation for the role.

Support for experienced principals

Experienced principals are a critical asset to the education system. Systems that actively support experienced leaders and enable them to mentor others, lead networks and contribute to system level improvement are more resilient and innovative.

Currently, professional learning provision for experienced principals in Northern Ireland is limited. TransformED committed to addressing this gap by developing a dedicated programme for experienced school leaders.

Such a programme will:

- recognise the breadth and intensity of the Principal role;
- support resilience, wellbeing and sustainable leadership;
- deepen expertise in leading teaching and learning;
- develop capacity for mentoring, coaching and system leadership; and
- provide opportunities for collaborative learning with peers.

This represents a decisive shift from viewing leadership development as role entry preparation to recognising it as an ongoing professional responsibility and entitlement.

In recent weeks, the Department has launched the Northern Ireland Leaders of Education Programme. This evidence-based programme draws on well established international models, including the National Leaders of Education in England and system leadership approaches in high-performing jurisdictions such as Scotland and New Zealand, where peer led support has been shown to improve school outcomes and build leadership capacity.

The programme will bring together a group of highly effective school leaders to work alongside schools requiring additional support, while also contributing to wider system improvement and reform. Seconded school leaders will work in partnership with the Department, the Education Authority and other delivery partners to deliver targeted, high-quality support where it is most needed.



The contribution of Higher Education Institutions

Higher Education Institutions in Northern Ireland make a significant contribution to leadership development through postgraduate and accredited programmes. Each institution has developed distinctive strengths in educational leadership and these programmes support high-quality outcomes.

International research emphasises the value of strong partnerships with universities, particularly where academic rigour is combined with job embedded learning. Continued collaboration with Higher Education Institutions will be an essential component of a coherent leadership development ecosystem.





Conclusion

Leadership quality is a decisive factor in the success of both schools individually and education systems more widely. Northern Ireland's ambition for educational excellence cannot be realised without a strong, supported and continuously developing leadership workforce.

This chapter sets out a coherent and inclusive approach to leadership development – one that identifies potential early, prepares leaders thoroughly and sustains their growth throughout their careers.

Through deliberate investment in leadership, Northern Ireland will strengthen teaching, improve outcomes for learners and build a resilient, outward looking education system capable of sustained improvement.

Key commitments

We will:

- **Strengthen leadership pathways** across the system, ensuring coherence, progression and alignment from middle leadership to system leadership.
- **Review, strengthen and invest in professional learning for middle leaders and co-ordinators**, ensuring provision meets the needs of aspiring, newly appointed and experienced middle leaders.
- **Review, strengthen and invest in professional learning for senior leaders**, ensuring coherent pathways for progression and sustained development.
- Develop and pilot a **replacement qualification for headship**, aligned to the contemporary demands of principalship.
- Consider making the replacement **qualification for headship a mandatory requirement** for principalship once it is established and embedded within the leadership pathway.
- Develop a **dedicated professional learning programme for experienced Principals**, recognising their ongoing development needs and strengthening their role as system leaders.
- Develop and expand **coaching and mentoring** capacity across the education system to support leadership development, strengthen professional practice and contribute to sustained school and system improvement.
- Strengthen the provision of school-to-school support through the **Northern Ireland Leaders of Education Programme**.



CHAPTER 9

Conclusion

“
***Teachers are the architects
of our future.***

Andreas Schleicher
”

Excellence in education depends on the daily practice, judgement and expertise of teachers and leaders working in classrooms and schools across Northern Ireland. Investing in their learning is, therefore, not optional; it is a system necessity.

This strategy marks a decisive and long overdue step change in how teacher professional learning is planned, delivered and sustained in Northern Ireland. It sets out a clear ambition: to develop and sustain an expert, confident and empowered teaching profession through structured, high-quality, career-long professional learning. More importantly, it establishes the conditions required to make that ambition a reality rather than an aspiration.

Notably, this strategy aims to bring coherence where fragmentation has historically limited impact. It sets out a clear professional learning continuum, aligned from Initial Teacher Education through induction, early career development, experienced practice, leadership and system leadership. It recognises that teacher expertise develops cumulatively over time and that professional learning must be sustained, evidence informed and closely connected to classroom practice if it is to improve outcomes for learners.

Crucially, the strategy sets out plans to establish the infrastructure required to deliver reform at scale. The proposed creation of a Northern Ireland Centre for Educational Excellence and Improvement, supported by a unified digital professional learning platform, aims to provide the strategic direction and coherence that have previously been missing. These reforms will ensure that curriculum design and implementation, professional learning, leadership development and school improvement are no longer pursued in parallel but are deliberately aligned and mutually reinforcing.

TransformED also fundamentally rebalances responsibility and trust. Through sustained investment, most notably the Teacher Professional Learning Fund, schools are empowered to identify their own priorities and commission high-quality professional learning suited to their context, while operating within a coherent system level framework. This balance of school led improvement and system level coherence reflects international best practice and will position Northern Ireland alongside high-performing education systems worldwide.

TransformED reforms will not succeed without the teaching profession. Teachers are not passive recipients of change; they are its architects. This strategy, therefore, places professional agency, collaboration and enquiry at its centre, enabling teachers and leaders to learn with and from one another, engage meaningfully with research and contribute to improvement beyond their own classrooms.



What this means for teachers and school leaders

This strategy is about *you* – *your* professionalism, your expertise and your impact. It recognises that great teaching is skilled, complex and continuously evolving work and that teachers deserve a professional learning system that supports them to do it well.

What this means in practice:

You will have guaranteed, sustained access to high-quality professional learning throughout your career. This will not be a one-off entitlement or an optional extra, but a core expectation of the teaching profession in Northern Ireland. From entry into teaching, through early career development, subject and leadership progression, school leadership as an experienced Principal and into system leadership roles, professional learning will be coherent, purposeful and closely aligned to the real demands of each stage.

Professional learning will be more relevant and more useful. It will be grounded in evidence, aligned to curriculum priorities and focused on classroom practice. You will have greater access to subject-specific learning, especially in areas such as literacy and numeracy, so that your professional development supports what you teach and how pupils learn, not generic training disconnected from daily practice.

You will have greater choice and agency, supported by sustained investment through the Teacher Professional Learning Fund. Schools will have the flexibility to commission professional learning that meets local needs, while operating within a system that ensures quality, equity and coherence across Northern Ireland.

You will be better supported through collaboration. This strategy places strong emphasis on professional learning communities – within schools, across clusters and through subject networks – because improvement is strongest when teachers learn together, share practice and challenge thinking constructively.

You will benefit from clearer pathways and progression, whether you choose to deepen expertise in the classroom, take on mentoring or coaching roles, or move into leadership. This strategy explicitly values advanced classroom practice and professional expertise, as well as formal leadership positions.

Importantly, this strategy is also about respect and sustainability. By strengthening induction, early career support, mentoring and leadership development, it aims to ensure that teachers are supported, not overloaded and that professional learning contributes to confidence, wellbeing and retention so that teaching remains a fulfilling and respected career.

This strategy represents a long-term commitment to educational excellence, professional trust and system improvement. In setting out a coherent vision, a robust evidence base and a practical delivery framework, *Leading Together for Excellence*, aims to provide Northern Ireland with the foundations of a truly world-class professional learning system.

Area	Headline Commitment
Professional learning entitlement	Establish a clear, career-long entitlement to high-quality professional learning for every teacher and leader in Northern Ireland.
System coherence	Move from fragmented provision to a coherent, system wide professional learning framework aligned to TransformED priorities.
Centre for educational excellence and improvement	Establish a dedicated Centre located in the Department to lead, coordinate and commission professional learning, leadership development, curriculum support and school improvement.
Sustained investment	Sustain multi year investment in professional learning, including the £31m Teacher Professional Learning Fund, enabling schools to plan and deliver high impact development.
Curriculum aligned learning	Ensure professional learning is tightly aligned to system priorities, notably curriculum reform, and statutory assessment, with strengthened subject-specific development including literacy and numeracy.
Quality assurance	Commission and quality assure professional learning to ensure it is evidence informed, sustained and focused on improving classroom practice and pupil outcomes.
Digital professional learning platform	Deliver a unified digital platform to provide equitable access, transparent recording and collaborative professional learning opportunities for all teachers.
Professional standards and pathways	Modernise teacher competences and introduce leadership standards to underpin a coherent professional learning continuum and clear career pathways.
Early career support	Guarantee consistent, high-quality induction and early professional development, strengthening mentoring and guided learning for early career teachers.
Leadership development	Strengthen leadership development at every level, including middle leaders, senior leaders, Principals and system leaders.
Collaboration and communities	Invest in professional learning communities, subject networks and school to school collaboration to build collective expertise and reduce isolation.
Research informed practice	Improve access to education research and strengthen the connection between evidence and practice across all professional learning.
Impact and evaluation	Monitor and evaluate the impact of professional learning systematically, ensuring sustained improvement in teaching quality and learner outcomes.

ANNEX A:

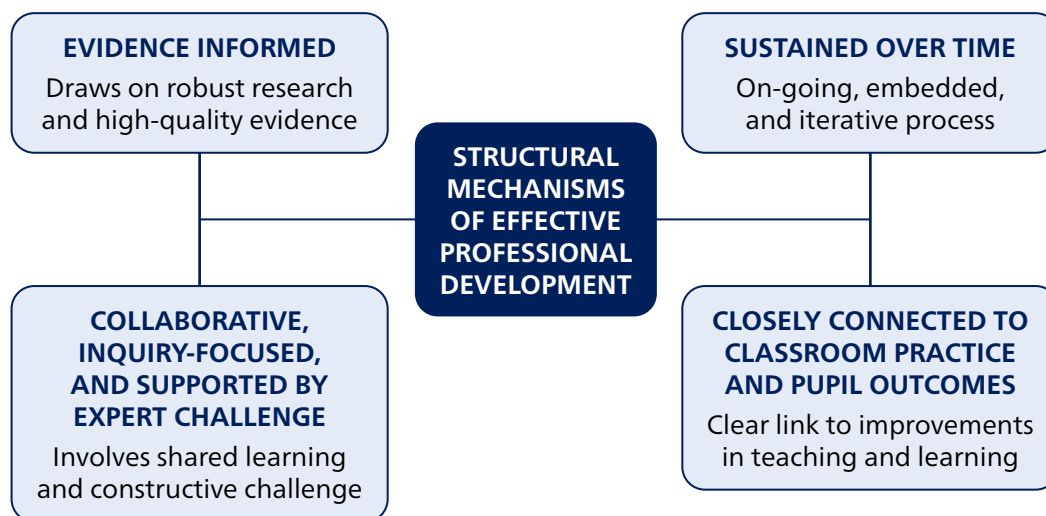
Features of effective professional learning

International research is unequivocal: professional learning only improves teaching and pupil outcomes when it is well designed and well delivered. High-performing education systems therefore focus not just on *what* professional learning addresses, but on *how* it is structured, implemented and sustained over time.

Effective professional learning is characterised by a set of well established features: it is evidence informed, sustained rather than episodic, collaborative in nature and closely connected to classroom practice. When these features are present, professional learning strengthens teachers' knowledge, sharpens practice and leads to measurable improvements in pupils' learning.

The sections that follow outline the core features of effective professional learning that underpin this strategy. Together, these principles will guide the commissioning, delivery and evaluation of professional learning across TransformED, ensuring that investment translates into sustained improvement in teaching and outcomes for learners.

FEATURES OF EFFECTIVE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING





Evidence informed

Effective professional learning draws on robust research, high-quality evidence and data about pupil learning. It aligns teacher development with an understanding of what works, why it works and under what conditions.

High-quality professional learning:

- develops practice and theory together, ensuring teachers understand not only *what* to do, but *why* it works;
- links pedagogical knowledge with subject-specific and specialist knowledge;
- draws on the best available evidence, including high quality academic research and well evaluated approaches;
- uses teaching resources and materials that have been tested and refined;
- is supported by staff with expertise who can help teachers interpret and apply evidence thoughtfully; and
- explicitly challenges assumptions, beliefs and expectations about teaching and how children learn.

Evidence is not used prescriptively but professionally, supporting teachers to make informed judgements in complex classroom contexts.

Sustained over time

Professional learning that changes practice cannot be delivered through one off events. International evidence shows that improvement occurs when learning is ongoing, iterative and embedded in the daily work of schools.

Effective professional learning:

- forms part of a sustained programme, typically spanning at least two terms;
- includes repeated cycles of learning, practice, feedback and refinement;
- ensures that one off activities are deliberately connected within a coherent sequence; and
- provides structured opportunities for experimentation, reflection, feedback and evaluation.

This sustained approach allows new knowledge and practices to be tested, adapted and embedded over time, increasing the likelihood of lasting impact.



Collaborative, inquiry focused and supported by expert challenge

Professional learning is more effective when teachers learn with and from one another. Collaborative approaches reduce isolation, deepen thinking and support collective improvement.

High-quality professional learning:

- builds in peer support for problem solving and professional dialogue;
- includes focused discussion about classroom practice and supporting groups of pupils with similar learning needs;
- deliberately challenges existing practice by introducing new perspectives and raising expectations; and
- includes coaching or mentoring from skilled colleagues who model effective practice and provide constructive challenge.

Collaboration is most powerful when supported by expertise and structured inquiry, ensuring professional dialogue leads to improved practice rather than simply sharing experiences.

Closely connected to classroom practice and pupil outcomes

The ultimate purpose of professional learning is to improve teaching and learning. Every professional learning activity must therefore have a clear line of sight to classroom practice and pupil outcomes.

Effective professional learning:

- is driven by the question: *How will this improve learning for pupils?*
- is designed around teachers' existing knowledge, experience and classroom context;
- makes learning objectives explicit and clearly linked to intended outcomes;
- ensures activities connect logically to improvements in practice;
- provides structured opportunities for reflection and feedback on implementation; and
- involves ongoing evaluation of impact on pupil learning.

Professional learning must be responsive and adaptive, continuously refined in light of evidence from classrooms.

Professional learning must also be context sensitive. Effective programmes reflect the realities of early years, primary, post primary and special education settings, as well as teachers' stage of career. Context does not replace evidence; it shapes how evidence is applied.



The structural mechanisms of effective professional learning

The Education Endowment Foundation's *Effective Professional Development Guidance* extends these features by identifying the mechanisms that explain how professional learning leads to change.

Crucially, effectiveness is determined not by format or delivery mode, but by the presence and sequencing of these mechanisms: the observable actions that influence teacher behaviour.

These essential mechanisms, organised into four inter connected groups, form the active ingredients of successful professional learning.

Mechanisms that build knowledge

These mechanisms support teachers to acquire the concepts, principles and evidence that underpin effective practice:

- Managing cognitive load – structuring learning so it is manageable and coherent;
- Revisiting prior learning – anchoring new ideas in existing knowledge;
- Presenting information clearly – using explanations, examples and representations that support understanding.

Mechanisms that motivate teachers

Motivation is essential for sustained engagement and implementation. These mechanisms help teachers commit to and persist with change:

- Setting and agreeing goals – clarifying what practice should improve;
- Prompting action planning – supporting teachers to plan how and when changes will occur; and
- Providing feedback and reinforcing progress – sustaining momentum and confidence.

Mechanisms that develop teaching techniques

These mechanisms bridge theory and practice by supporting teachers to learn, rehearse and refine new approaches:

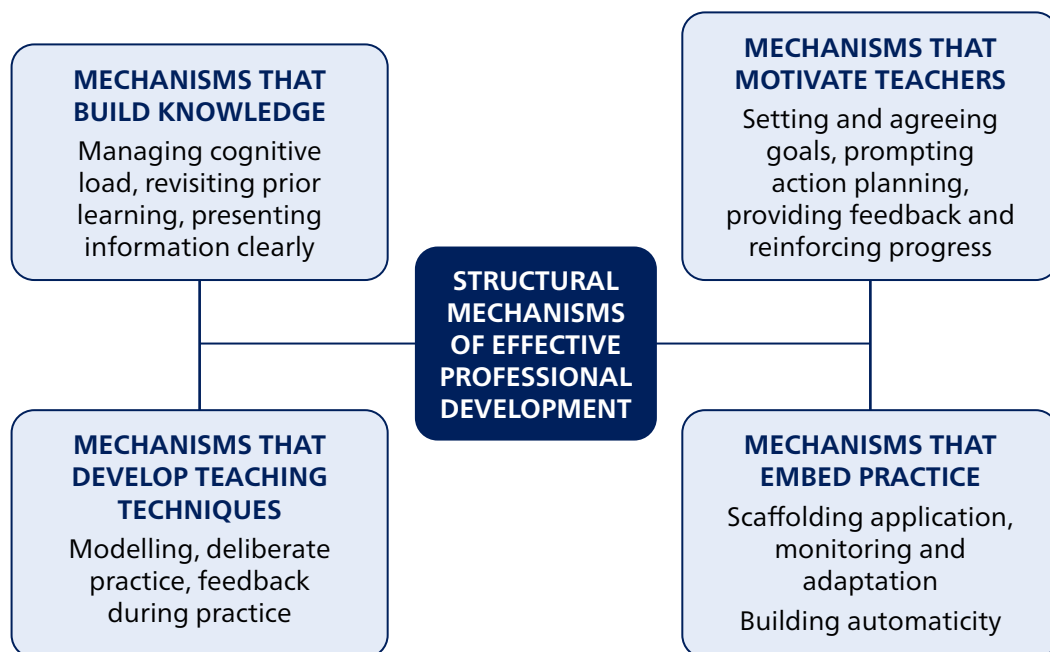
- Modelling – demonstrating effective practice in action;
- Deliberate practice – focused rehearsal of specific techniques; and
- Feedback during practice – strengthening accuracy and effectiveness.

Mechanisms that embed practice

Lasting change requires support over time to ensure new approaches become habitual:

- Scaffolding application – providing tools and prompts to support transfer to the classroom;
- Monitoring, reflection and adaptation – refining practice in context; and
- Building automaticity – embedding new practices into routine classroom work.

THE STRUCTURAL MECHANISMS OF EFFECTIVE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT







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