

Written Statement to the Northern Ireland Assembly

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

A need to prioritise investment in education:

statutory assessment: publication of Key Stage Assessment outcomes

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Today, the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) published the 2025/26 end of Key Stage Statutory Assessment Outcomes. Tests in literacy and numeracy were taken by pupils in Years 4, 7 and 10 in March 2026. These assessments are the first system-level domestic assessments in over 20 years and the first to utilise a single validated assessment across all selected schools.

The assessments provide a robust and consistent measure of literacy and numeracy outcomes, enabling meaningful comparison across the education system and establishing a reliable baseline against which future progress can be measured.

This publication, therefore, marks an important milestone for our education system, providing a valuable picture of our children and young people's outcomes in literacy and numeracy at key stages of their education. This is a welcome and a necessary step, intended to help inform policies, support and interventions. I wish to thank all schools and pupils who participated in the assessments. There is a wealth of important information within the data.

The assessments

A representative sample of over 12,000 pupils in relevant year groups across 358 schools were selected to participate in the assessments.

Pupils in each Key Stage sat the assessments at the same time, under the same conditions. The assessments were marked externally by CCEA. This has ensured that the results provide a reliable indication of comparative performance across the wider education system. CCEA highlights that the tests had high levels of reliability indicating they produced highly consistent results and that measurement error was relatively low.

Outcomes

The table below shows the percentage of pupils below, at or above the expected level in literacy and numeracy at the end of each key stage.

Skill	Key Stage	Expected Level	% below expected Level	% at or above expected Level	% above expected Level
English Literacy	Key Stage 1	Level 2	20.4%	79.6%	21.5%
	Key Stage 2	Level 4	27.0%	73.0%	20.0%
	Key Stage 3	Level 5	27.9%	72.1%	29.2%
Numeracy	Key Stage 1	Level 2	22.0%	78.0%	28.1%
	Key Stage 2	Level 4	26.9%	73.1%	28.5%
	Key Stage 3	Level 5	32.2%	67.8%	23.0%

The table below shows the outcomes by Free School Meal Entitlement.

Skill	Key Stage	Free School Meal Entitlement	% below expected Level	% at or above expected Level	% above expected Level
English Literacy	Key Stage 1	No FSME	15.8%	84.2%	25.7%
		FSME	33.4%	66.6%	9.4%
		Total	20.4%	79.6%	21.5%
	Key Stage 2	No FSME	22.1%	77.9%	23.6%
		FSME	41.3%	58.7%	9.5%
		Total	27.0%	73.0%	20.0%
	Key Stage 3	No FSME	23.0%	77.0%	33.0%
		FSME	43.3%	56.7%	17.6%
		Total	27.9%	72.1%	29.2%
Numeracy	Key Stage 1	No FSME	17.3%	82.7%	33.1%
		FSME	35.4%	64.6%	13.9%
		Total	22.0%	78.0%	28.1%
	Key Stage 2	No FSME	21.0%	79.0%	33.9%
		FSME	44.0%	56.0%	12.5%
		Total	26.9%	73.1%	28.5%
	Key Stage 3	No FSME	25.7%	74.3%	27.2%
		FSME	51.4%	48.6%	10.5%
		Total	32.2%	67.8%	23.0%

It is encouraging to see strong performance amongst the highest-attaining pupils, with at least 20% of pupils performing above the expected level at each Key Stages. However, the findings also highlight significant challenges that require our collective attention.

Notably, by the end of primary school almost 3 in 10 pupils are not at the expected level in literacy (27%) and numeracy (26%). In numeracy, this extends to almost one-third of pupils (32%) by the end of Key Stage 3. If we consider that some pupils have been exempted from the assessments for a variety of reasons, including SEN, the outcomes are starker.

Critically, the gap between pupils entitled to Free School Meals and their peers is significant and widens during their school careers. It is hugely significantly that more than 40% of pupils entitled to Free School Meals are not at the expected levels in literacy and numeracy by the end of primary school, and over half are not at the expected level in numeracy by the end of Key Stage 3.

These outcomes correlate strongly with what teachers themselves told us when they reported Key Stage outcomes in 2024/25. They further correlate with the PISA 2025 data which some, disturbingly, sought to ignore or minimise. This domestic data from tests sat by pupils across Northern Ireland cannot be ignored. We are facing significant challenges in both literacy and numeracy.

Investment in education

Our education system is operating under significant and sustained pressure. Years of underinvestment, coupled with the need for structural reform, have left schools increasingly stretched. Funding has not kept pace with rising demand, limiting our ability to invest adequately in our workforce, school estate and the services that support our most vulnerable children and young people.

At the same time, the challenges facing schools have become more complex. The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic continue to be felt through changing attitudes to attendance, engagement and learning, while a growing range of social and economic pressures is affecting children's readiness to learn. Increasingly, schools are being asked to address issues that originate beyond the classroom but have a profound impact within it.

Demand for special educational needs provision has also increased significantly. As in many other jurisdictions, Northern Ireland has seen a sustained rise in the number and complexity of SEN needs. While schools and staff work tirelessly to provide support, the current system is under considerable strain and requires reform to ensure that children receive the right support at the right time.

Against this backdrop, today's results underline the need for sustained focus and investment in education across government. They also reinforce the importance of being honest about our current position and learning from high-performing education systems internationally. The strongest-performing jurisdictions do not rely on short-term initiatives. They invest consistently and relentlessly in the factors that have the greatest impact on outcomes.

Educational research is clear that high-quality teaching and learning are at the heart of driving educational improvement. The McKinsey and Company, Spark and Sustain Report (February 2024) notes that, 'Based on clear evidence into what influences outcomes, successful school systems ground changes in the classroom, focusing first and foremost on teachers and the content they deliver'.

That is why TransformED provides a renewed focus on the core areas of: curriculum; assessment; qualifications; tackling educational disadvantage; and school improvement. Reform in each of these areas is underpinned by greater investment in and a more coherent approach to Teacher Professional Learning. These are key factors that shape high-performing education systems. They are not peripheral issues but rather they are the fundamental building blocks of educational excellence. We are

now feeling the impact of the limited focus or investment during the past decade. All need review, evaluation and improvement.

This is not, however, as is sometimes mischaracterised to the exclusion of other priorities.

Many other wider areas of my Department's work are complementary to and complemented by TransformED.

The world's highest-performing systems consistently invest in quality early years education – getting children ready for formal learning through well-structured and purposeful play. This helps children develop the language, literacy, numeracy, social and cognitive foundations that underpin future success. It is one of the most effective ways to improve outcomes, narrow attainment gaps and reduce educational disadvantage before it becomes entrenched. That is why I am delivering significant additional investment in and expansion of early years provision.

Similarly, there is a need for greater investment in health and well-being interventions and pastoral care. It is also vital that the needs of pupils with SEN are carefully integrated into educational reform. TransformED links closely to the SEN Reform Agenda. Quality provision for children with SEN must be underpinned by up-to-date, evidence-informed practice and shaped by research on what works.

Ultimately, lasting educational improvement requires sustained commitment from the Executive as a whole. Transforming education is not the work of a single Minister, Department or Assembly mandate. It requires a long-term partnership across government and society, underpinned by consistent policy, sustained investment and a shared belief that improving education is one of the most important investments we can make in our future prosperity, wellbeing and social cohesion.

Literacy and numeracy

Turning to the focus of these assessments, literacy and numeracy are the foundation upon which all learning is built. If young people cannot read, write, communicate effectively or work confidently with numbers, their ability to succeed in education, training and employment is significantly constrained.

Much is said about employability skills but let us be clear: the skills employers consistently value most are strong literacy and numeracy. UK and Northern Ireland employer surveys repeatedly show that weaknesses in these core skills contribute to skills shortages, recruitment difficulties and reduced productivity

These are not simply two subjects among many. They are the gateway to every other area of learning and development. Employers need young people who can understand information, communicate clearly, solve problems and apply numerical reasoning. Skills such as teamwork, creativity and digital competence are important, but they are

built on the firm foundations of literacy and numeracy. Without those foundations, progression becomes far more difficult.

We also know that strong literacy and numeracy are among the most powerful levers available to improve outcomes for all children, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds and those with special educational needs. When pupils can access learning successfully, they are more likely to engage in school, attend regularly, develop confidence and achieve their potential. Early intervention is therefore not simply an educational priority, but an inclusion priority.

Many behavioural difficulties have their roots in frustration. Pupils who cannot access classroom learning are more likely to disengage, become anxious or exhibit challenging behaviour. Improving literacy and numeracy helps remove barriers to learning and creates the conditions for greater engagement and confidence.

Attendance and attainment are closely linked. Pupils who experience repeated difficulty in school are less likely to feel successful, connected or motivated. By ensuring children develop secure literacy and numeracy skills at an early stage, we increase the likelihood that they remain engaged with learning and attend regularly.

It must remain a central purpose of our education system, working in partnership with parents and families, to ensure that every child develops secure literacy and numeracy skills. After seven years of primary education, pupils should have a strong foundation. After twelve years of compulsory education, every young person should leave school equipped with the reading, writing, oracy and mathematical skills needed to thrive in life and work.

Yet, in the context of a global decline in literacy, a changing society and after many years of limited investment, we know there is much more to do. Schools need sustained support, investment, high-quality resources and professional development to deliver the improvements we all want to see.

Through TransformED, we are committed to ensuring every child secures mastery of these foundations. Our new evidence-informed literacy framework has been warmly welcomed by schools, and a complementary numeracy framework will follow, alongside a programme of support and investment designed to strengthen both areas across the system.

We also recognise that literacy is about more than decoding words on a page. Strong reading depends upon strong knowledge. The acquisition of cultural knowledge across the curriculum is fundamental to supporting good literacy. Cognitive science and the psychology of background knowledge in reading, shows that once the foundations of phonics are securely laid, we can only become literate through wide, secure connected knowledge. Vocabulary size is the outward expression of an inward acquisition of knowledge.

As Chris Such's work on reading has explained, we will not make children capable of accessing any text, unless they have broad cultural knowledge, systematically taught through humanities, science and the arts. Research shows unequivocally that the steady building of broad, systematic knowledge can have a decisive impact on closing the disadvantage gap in reading.

None of this can be achieved by schools alone. Our school leaders, teachers and support staff work tirelessly in increasingly challenging circumstances. They are educating children with more complex needs, rising levels of special educational need and significant financial pressures.

Today, I ask colleagues across all parties to move beyond short-term politics and focus on what matters most. Let us work together, with a shared sense of purpose, to invest in the foundations that change lives. Strong literacy and numeracy are not just educational goals. They are the key to greater opportunity, stronger communities, a more productive economy and better outcomes for every child. Support TransformED's focus on literacy and numeracy and support schools in the difficult job they have in our changing society.

Conclusion

I want to end by thanking our school leaders, teachers and support staff. But thanks alone are not enough. They need our support, our focus and our collective determination to tackle the challenges we know exist.

Today, I ask colleagues to come together behind a simple but powerful ambition: that every child leaves school literate, numerate and ready to thrive. If we get this right, we will transform lives and strengthen our society for decades to come. If we get it wrong, the costs will be paid not only by our education system, but across every part of government and society.

Let us therefore put our collective energy where it will make the greatest difference: giving every child the strong foundations they deserve.