

Written Statement to the Northern Ireland Assembly

**DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION POSITION PAPER ON 'PISA 2025:
CONFRONTING DECLINE, RAISING AMBITION'**

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Paul Givan MLA

Minister for Education

Introduction

I wish to inform Members of the publication of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2025 results.

PISA, conducted by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), is the world's leading international benchmark of educational performance. It assesses the knowledge and skills of 15-year-old pupils in mathematics, reading and science and enables meaningful comparisons between education systems across the globe. In 2025, 91 countries and education systems participated, including Northern Ireland.

Though PISA tests the knowledge and skills of 15-year-olds, it reflects on education systems over a much longer time period. A pupil participating in PISA aged 15 will have been in full time education for a decade, much of it shaped by policy decisions made well before they entered school. As a result, there is an inevitable time lag between the implementation of education reforms and their reflection in PISA outcomes.

The good news is that Northern Ireland remains a strong-performing education system by international standards. Our young people continue to outperform those in many participating countries and jurisdictions. However, we should not confuse relative success with sufficient progress, nor should we mistake being good for being good enough.

Better than average is not the same as world class. Internationally our main competition is not all those countries which participate in PISA but those with the best education systems.

These results should not be interpreted as a reflection of any lack of commitment on the part of teachers, school leaders or support staff. Across Northern Ireland, educators continue to demonstrate extraordinary dedication to children and young people.

Rather, the challenge for policymakers and support bodies is to ensure that schools are equipped with the curriculum, support, evidence and professional learning required to enable that commitment to translate into improved outcomes for all learners.

PISA outcomes

It is clear that many education systems across the world are facing significant challenges and Northern Ireland is no exception.

The evidence shows clearly that our performance in reading and mathematics has declined significantly over the past decade. At the same time, the proportion of pupils failing to reach the internationally recognised baseline level of proficiency has increased.

That should concern every parent, every teacher, every policymaker and every elected representative.

Literacy and numeracy are the foundations upon which all further learning depends.

Reading, in particular, is the gateway skill that unlocks success across the curriculum and throughout life. Yet we are seeing declining reading proficiency, reduced enjoyment of reading and widening gaps between those who read regularly and those who do not.

Most concerning is the fact that while Northern Ireland has largely maintained the performance of its highest-achieving pupils, the performance of its lowest-attaining pupils has deteriorated significantly. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that this is at least in part due to education policy set at the beginning of the 21st century, which is only now being reformed.

The measure of a successful education system is not simply how well its highest achievers perform, but how effectively it supports every child to succeed. On that measure, these results demonstrate that we are not doing well enough.

The figures are stark. In mathematics, 30% of pupils are now performing below baseline Level 2 proficiency, compared with 19% in 2015. In reading, the proportion has risen from 15% to 23%, while in science it has increased from 18% to 22%.

It is not acceptable that almost one-third of our young people do not possess basic proficiency in mathematics and almost one-quarter do not possess basic proficiency in reading.

Nor can we ignore the fact that Northern Ireland is being significantly outperformed in science, reading and mathematics by both England and the Republic of Ireland.

Some will take comfort from the fact the gap between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland has closed but unfortunately this is as a result of the decline in the performance of the Republic of Ireland and not an improvement in ours.

These results are not a one off but reflect a trend over recent PISA cycles. They are not an accident or the product of some statistical aberration. Education policy has been devolved in the United Kingdom for over 25 years. It would be irrational not to consider the direction of policy in England, Scotland and Wales as well as our own in assessing what works and what does not.

As a system we must ask important questions about our curriculum, assessment and pedagogical approaches when we continue to attract many of our most highly qualified young people into teaching yet achieve weaker outcomes than a jurisdiction such as England facing greater challenges in teacher recruitment and retention.

These results should serve as a wake-up call. They are a clear signal that renewal and investment in the core areas of teaching and learning cannot be deferred.

Like many education systems internationally, Northern Ireland is experiencing a decade of falling performance. We have faced a global pandemic. However, decline is not inevitable and it must not be accepted.

A highly educated population is fundamental to Northern Ireland's economic prosperity and future competitiveness. As technology continues to transform the labour market, the cost of educational underachievement becomes ever greater. We cannot afford for any child or young person to be left behind.

Academic Selection and system performance

Some will of course seek to interpret these results through the tired lens of academic selection, ignoring the fact that academic selection was also in place when our results were materially better.

However, international evidence does not support the view that school structures determine educational outcomes. High-performing systems can be found amongst both selective and non-selective jurisdictions.

Rather what matters most is the quality of teaching, curriculum, assessment, school leadership and the support available to learners. The question is not whether a child attends a selective or non-selective school but whether every child receives an excellent education.

Indeed, if school structure were the decisive factor, we would expect to see a consistent pattern internationally. No such pattern exists.

Closer to home, for example, Wales operates a fully comprehensive system yet recorded the lowest performance across the UK in science, reading and mathematics. It is significantly outperformed by all other UK systems and Ireland: whether selective or not.

These comparisons illustrate an important lesson: school structures matter far less than what happens within classrooms. International evidence consistently indicates that the quality of teaching has a greater impact on pupil outcomes than organisational structures.

That is one of the reasons why TransformED places such emphasis on curriculum, assessment, pedagogy and teacher professional learning. Even the biggest critics of TransformED must concede that for the first time in many years we are having important questions about what we teach, how we teach it and how we evaluate progress.

England's PISA performance is particularly noteworthy. Despite well-documented challenges in teacher recruitment and retention, England significantly outperformed Northern Ireland in science, reading and mathematics and recorded substantially higher proportions of top-performing pupils.

Whilst no system can or should be copied wholesale, it would be blinkered not to believe there are important lessons to be learned from England's sustained focus on curriculum reform. The implementation of a knowledge-rich curriculum has been designed to ensure that all children acquire both the knowledge and fundamental skills in literacy and numeracy they need to succeed.

Finland provides a further important lesson. Once regarded as one of the world's highest-performing education systems and frequently cited as an international model, Finland has experienced a sustained decline in reading, mathematics and science over almost two decades. The PISA 2025 results show that this trend has continued, with performance now significantly below the levels that made Finland a global benchmark for educational excellence.

Whilst causation cannot be assumed, it is notable that over this period, Finland pursued curriculum reforms that placed greater emphasis on cross-curricular competencies and broader skills, while maintaining comparatively limited inspection and external accountability arrangements.

Finland's experience demonstrates that even the strongest education systems cannot afford complacency. Success must be continually renewed, and strong performance today is no guarantee of strong performance tomorrow.

International evidence suggests that the highest-performing education systems do not treat knowledge and skills as competing priorities. They typically place strong emphasis on the systematic acquisition of knowledge, recognising that higher-order skills are most effectively developed when underpinned by a secure foundation of subject knowledge.

Evidence and accountability

I also believe these results reinforce the importance of having robust system-level evidence and effective accountability arrangements.

For much of the last decade, Northern Ireland has operated with significantly less performance and inspection evidence than many comparable education systems. The combined effects of industrial action and the pandemic severely limited the information available to monitor performance, identify emerging issues and target support where it was most needed.

For a prolonged period, the Department has been without comprehensive system-wide pupil performance data across Key Stages 1 to 3. The Inspectorate's ability to provide independent assurance regarding quality and safeguarding has also been significantly constrained. In short, we had no way of knowing in real time what was going wrong.

No high-performing education system would choose to operate with such limited visibility of performance. Telling ourselves we have a world class education system is no substitute for having a world class education system.

It is difficult to ignore the fact that this weakening of the evidence and accountability framework has occurred during the same period in which educational performance has deteriorated. Correlation does not itself prove causation, but no high-performing education system would knowingly choose to reduce its ability to understand how well its pupils are performing, identify emerging concerns or provide independent assurance on standards.

That is why I am progressing the Education Inspections Bill and why my Department has reintroduced system-level assessment activity. Effective inspection and robust assessment data are not optional extras. They are essential components of a modern education system committed to continuous improvement.

These results should, therefore, prompt serious reflection across all political parties. If we are genuinely concerned about declining standards and widening attainment gaps, we cannot at the same time be indifferent to the systems of assessment, inspection and accountability that help identify problems and drive improvement.

The question for all of us is whether we are prepared to support the measures necessary to reverse these trends, or whether we are content to continue operating with significantly less evidence about educational performance than is available in other education systems.

TransformED

These findings also further strengthen the case for sustained reform and investment through my Department's TransformED programme.

TransformED is a comprehensive programme of evidence-informed reform designed to address longstanding challenges, raise standards and improve outcomes for all learners.

At its heart is a simple conviction: the quality of teaching is the single most important in-school factor influencing educational outcomes.

The world's highest-performing education systems focus improvement efforts closest to the learner and work outward from the classroom. They focus relentlessly on what is taught, how it is taught and how learning is assessed. That is precisely why TransformED places teaching and learning at its core.

Since the launch of TransformED in March 2025, significant progress has been made through investment in teacher professional learning and establishing the policy foundations for reform.

We have developed new evidence-based policy frameworks across a range of critical areas, including teacher professional learning, initial teacher education, statutory assessment, qualifications, curriculum reform and literacy. In the coming weeks, we will also see the publication of the Numeracy Framework, a new school support programme to replace the Formal Intervention Process and consultation on a new School Effectiveness Framework.

Taken together, this represents the most significant periods of educational policy development in many years. Over coming months, the new policy architecture will be largely complete.

TransformED is now, therefore, moving decisively to implementation. The challenge is achieving effective implementation at both pace and scale. That is why, I have

established the new Northern Ireland Centre for Educational Excellence and Improvement within my Department.

The purpose of the Centre is to strengthen our ability to translate educational policy into classroom practice at scale and to ensure that schools receive coherent, high-quality support aligned to agreed priorities.

The Centre brings together the strategic leadership of curriculum, teacher professional learning, leadership development, school improvement, assessment and qualifications policy, and research and evaluation. It provides a dedicated body to coordinate activity and maintain a clear focus on educational improvement.

Those who argue that reform is unnecessary must answer some difficult questions.

Is it acceptable that almost one-third of our young people do not reach a basic level of proficiency in mathematics?

Is it acceptable that almost one-quarter fail to reach that standard in reading?

Is it acceptable that these figures have deteriorated over the last decade rather than improved?

Is it acceptable that outcomes for our lowest-attaining learners are moving in the wrong direction?

Is it acceptable that children from disadvantaged backgrounds continue to face significantly poorer outcomes than their peers?

Is it acceptable that Northern Ireland is now being outperformed across all three domains by both England and the Republic of Ireland?

I do not believe the answer to any of those questions is yes.

Those who oppose change must explain how these trends will be reversed without change. They must explain how attainment gaps will be closed, how literacy and numeracy outcomes will improve, and how Northern Ireland will become a world-leading education system while continuing largely to do what it has always done.

Standing still is not a strategy. Defending decline is not a strategy. Hoping for different outcomes without meaningful change is not a strategy.

Conclusion

The PISA 2025 results provide us with a challenge.

Whilst they confirm that Northern Ireland remains a strong-performing education system by international standards, they also highlight significant concerns about declining performance in reading and mathematics, widening gaps in foundational skills and the growing number of young people who are not reaching expected levels of proficiency.

Perhaps the most significant finding is that whilst many of our highest-attaining pupils continue to perform strongly, outcomes for lower-attaining learners have deteriorated.

We cannot, therefore, be complacent. We cannot assume that past success will guarantee future success. And we cannot accept a situation in which increasing numbers of young people leave compulsory education without the literacy and numeracy skills they need to thrive.

A highly educated population is fundamental to Northern Ireland's future prosperity, social wellbeing and economic competitiveness. In a rapidly changing world, educational underachievement carries a growing cost, not only for the individual learner, but for society as a whole.

We have a clear choice. We can accept declining standards, widening attainment gaps and increasing numbers of young people falling behind. Or we can act decisively to reverse those trends.

Through TransformED, my Department has chosen the path of reform.

Our ambition is clear: a world-leading education system in which every child and young person, regardless of background, benefits from excellent teaching, develops strong foundations in literacy and numeracy, and acquires the knowledge and skills needed to succeed in life and work.

That ambition will require sustained reform, sustained investment and sustained commitment across the entire education system. But our children and young people deserve nothing less, and the evidence published today makes clear why that work cannot wait.

With the quality of our teaching workforce and with the reforms set out through TransformED delivered, I believe that in ten to fifteen years' time Northern Ireland can have the best education system in Europe and the English-speaking world and be set to challenge the education super-powers of south-east Asia.