



Transform**ED**

FACTS, NOT FICTION

TransformED is one of the most significant programmes of education reform in Northern Ireland for a generation. As with any major reform programme, it has prompted debate and discussion. That is both expected and welcome. Good education policy should be informed by evidence, challenged by constructive scrutiny and shaped by professional dialogue.

However, some of the claims made about **TransformED** are based on misunderstandings about what the programme is or is not, what it proposes and why change is needed. This factsheet addresses some of the most common misconceptions.

Myth 1: TransformED is not needed

REALITY: **TransformED** is being introduced because the evidence shows that too many children are not achieving the outcomes they need.

Recent assessment data shows that almost three in ten pupils are not reaching the expected standard in literacy and numeracy by the end of primary school. By the end of Key Stage 3, almost one-third are below the expected standard in numeracy.

The picture is particularly concerning for disadvantaged pupils with attainment gaps remaining significant and persistent.

International evidence points in a similar direction. While Northern Ireland continues to perform well in many respects, recent PISA results show declining performance in reading and mathematics and a widening gap between higher and lower attainers.

Too many children are reaching later stages of education without secure foundations in literacy and numeracy.

To change this, we need to think critically about what is taught, how it is taught and how we assess progress. That is why we have carried out evidence-based reviews into curriculum, assessment and qualifications, as well as begun a major programme of investment in professional development. These are areas that have been neglected for too long.

The evidence shows that we need a programme of managed reform. Doing nothing would mean accepting falling standards.

TransformED is not about change for its own sake. It is about responding to evidence and improving outcomes for children and young people.

Myth 2: TransformED will increase teacher workload

REALITY: We know that workload is a major concern and one we must address.

One of the clearest lessons from the Curriculum Review was that many teachers are already carrying unnecessary workload. The current curriculum framework is highly open-ended and provides limited guidance on what should be taught and how knowledge should progress. As a result, schools often spend significant amounts of time designing and planning school-level curricula, as well as developing curriculum materials from scratch.

TransformED is designed to reduce this burden over time. Clearer curriculum frameworks, high-quality exemplification materials, improved assessment and greater access to professional learning will reduce the need for every school to develop everything themselves.

TransformED also prioritises significant investment in teacher professional learning, curriculum resources and implementation support. Schools will not be expected to deliver reform in isolation.

Importantly, **TransformED** is being implemented over a ten-year period. Curriculum development, consultation, piloting, professional learning and phased implementation are built into the programme. This reflects international evidence showing that sustainable improvement is achieved through careful implementation rather than rapid change.

The goal is simple: reduce unnecessary workload, provide greater support and give more time to focus on what matters most: high-quality teaching and learning.

Myth 3: TransformED is simply copying England's reforms

REALITY: The key features of education reforms in England in the 2010s included the introduction of academies, free schools, league tables, market-style competition and high-stakes accountability. None of these are part of the **TransformED** programme.

Instead, the core focus of **TransformED** is on investing in professional development and strengthening teaching and learning.

Of course, Northern Ireland should be prepared to learn from evidence wherever it emerges. This includes lessons from England, but also from Ireland, Australia, New Zealand, Singapore, Canada, Estonia, the United States and elsewhere. It is about looking at the evidence to find out what works and what doesn't work and applying that learning in a way that reflects our own context and values.

Most importantly, the reforms have been shaped by Northern Ireland educators. Curriculum Subject Working Groups, Principal Panels, teachers, academics and stakeholders have all contributed to the development of the programme. Likewise, implementation of reform will be guided by your voice.

TransformED combines international evidence with local expertise. It is not imported from elsewhere.

Myth 4: England's reforms damaged educational standards

REALITY: There are differing views about reforms in England. However, it is difficult to argue that educational standards have declined.

England's performance in international assessments has improved significantly over the last decade.

England has moved:

- from 10th to 4th place in PIRLS Reading;
- from 23rd to 9th in PISA Reading;
- from 36th to 10th in PISA Mathematics.

In PISA 2025, England outperformed Northern Ireland in reading, mathematics and science.

England's performance is not confined to its highest-attaining pupils. In PISA 2025, 84% of pupils reached at least the OECD's Level 2 benchmark in science, 81% in reading and 75% in mathematics, all above the OECD average.

Far from experiencing declining standards, England is now one of the top-performing education systems in Europe and the wider OECD.

For example, in PISA 2025, England outperformed 79 countries in reading and mathematics. In science, it outperformed 81 countries, with Estonia the only European country doing better.

Interestingly, the United Kingdom effectively provided a natural experiment in education policy over the past two decades. Each jurisdiction has followed different approaches to curriculum, assessment and school improvement. The significance is that these systems operate within broadly similar social and economic contexts, making comparisons more meaningful.

The latest international evidence points to a clear divergence in outcomes across the UK. England now performs significantly ahead of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland in reading, mathematics and science. This suggests that the different policy choices made over the past decade may have had a material impact on pupil outcomes, including the attainment of disadvantaged children.

People may disagree about which reforms contributed most to these improvements. What the evidence does not support is the claim that standards in England declined as a result of reform.

Myth 5: TransformED ignores teacher professionalism

REALITY: The opposite is true. At its heart, **TransformED** is an investment in teachers and school leaders.

Research consistently shows that high-quality teaching is the most important school-based factor influencing pupil outcomes. Improving education therefore depends on investing in the people who teach and lead our schools.

More than half of the actions within **TransformED** relate directly to professional learning and workforce development, making it the most significant investment in teacher development in a generation.

This includes:

- A £31 million Teacher Professional Learning Fund.
- New Science of Learning professional learning programmes.
- The Making Best Practice Programme, including funding for research-informed conferences.
- Enhanced induction and support for early career teachers.
- Expanded leadership development programmes for aspiring, new and experienced school leaders.
- Teacher education bursaries in shortage subjects.
- New opportunities for assessment training and accreditation.

TransformED recognises that lasting improvement comes from developing the expertise, confidence and leadership of the people working in classrooms every day.

The recently published Leading Together for Excellence Strategy for Teaching Professional Learning sets out this vision. It places professional learning at the centre of education reform and recognises that investing in teachers is one of the most effective ways to improve outcomes for learners.

Myth 6: Northern Ireland's current curriculum is working well

REALITY: Northern Ireland has many excellent schools and outstanding teachers. That is not in dispute.

However, strong teaching should not be confused with a strong curriculum framework.

The current statutory curriculum was introduced in 2007 and is approaching twenty years old. It provides considerable flexibility but often lacks clarity about what pupils should learn and how learning should build over time.

As a result, schools frequently have to make their own decisions about curriculum content, progression and sequencing. This creates inconsistency and places a significant planning burden on teachers.

The detailed evidence from Lucy Crehan's Strategic Review of the Northern Ireland Curriculum, which engaged widely with practitioners across the education system, is unambiguous: the current framework is overly vague, lacks clear progression and does not provide a sufficiently consistent entitlement for all learners.

Children deserve a curriculum that is clear, coherent and ambitious, while still allowing schools and teachers professional flexibility.

Myth 7: TransformED is eliminating creativity, communication and problem-solving

REALITY: This is perhaps the most common misunderstanding. The new curriculum provides clarity and coherence; it is sequenced and progressive, but it does not devalue or downplay skills or experiences. It is a knowledge-rich curriculum, not an information-rich curriculum.

An information-rich curriculum can become overloaded with disconnected content and facts. A knowledge-rich curriculum, by contrast, focuses on identifying the essential concepts, ideas and content that pupils need to learn at each stage of their education to support understanding, progression and future learning.

Neither is a knowledge-rich curriculum about memorisation or rote learning. The purpose of securing knowledge is not simply for pupils to recall facts, but to enable them to understand more, think more deeply and apply their learning more effectively. Knowledge provides the foundation for understanding, reasoning, creativity and problem-solving.

Good pedagogy is central to this approach. Effective teaching does not ask pupils to passively absorb information. It involves carefully explaining new concepts, checking understanding, using questioning to develop thinking, providing opportunities for practice and retrieval, and helping pupils make connections between new learning and what they already know. Through discussion, investigation, analysis, writing, practical activity and problem-solving, pupils learn to use and apply knowledge in increasingly sophisticated ways.

The highest-performing education systems increasingly recognise that knowledge and skills are not competing priorities. Knowledge is what enables skills to develop. Children do not learn to think critically, solve complex problems or communicate effectively in the abstract. They do so by drawing on what they know and understand.

TransformED therefore seeks to strengthen both knowledge and skills. By ensuring that pupils develop a secure grasp of the key concepts and content that underpin progression, the curriculum creates the conditions for deeper learning, greater creativity, stronger communication and more effective problem-solving. Knowledge is not the destination. It is the foundation upon which higher-order thinking is built.

Myth 8: Knowledge-rich curricula increase absence, disengagement and anxiety

REALITY: Across the UK and internationally, concerns about young people's mental health have grown significantly over the past two decades. Anxiety, emotional distress and wellbeing challenges have increased across countries with very different education systems and very different curriculum models.

The evidence suggests that these trends are being driven primarily by wider social factors, including poverty, family pressures, social media, sleep disruption, loneliness, bullying and the lasting effects of the pandemic, rather than by curriculum design.

Schools have an important role to play in supporting wellbeing, but it is important not to confuse correlation with causation. Rising mental health concerns have occurred in jurisdictions with knowledge-rich curricula, skills-based curricula and every variation in between.

In Wales, for example, with a skills-based curriculum, rates of diagnosable mental health conditions among children and young people are estimated to have doubled over the past two decades, rising from around one in ten in 2004 to one in five in 2023. Similar concerns have been reported internationally, regardless of the specific structure or content of national curricula.

A strong education system should promote both achievement and wellbeing. These are not competing priorities. In fact, success in learning, confidence, mastery and a sense of achievement can all contribute positively to wellbeing.

Claims that knowledge-rich curricula lead to greater disengagement or school avoidance are also difficult to reconcile with the evidence. England, which has moved furthest towards a knowledge-rich curriculum over the past decade, has consistently had the highest school attendance across the UK in recent years.

While attendance is influenced by many factors and no single curriculum model can determine whether pupils attend school, there is little evidence to suggest that a stronger emphasis on knowledge results in lower engagement with education. Indeed, high-performing systems increasingly seek to combine ambitious academic expectations with effective support for pupil wellbeing and belonging.

The challenge of improving young people's mental health requires a comprehensive response involving families, schools, communities, health services and government. Young people need effective support and early intervention when difficulties arise. But the evidence suggests that the growth in mental health problems is a complex societal issue.

The causes are multi-faceted and the response goes well beyond the remit of **TransformED** or the curriculum, which cannot be seen as the solution to all societal issues. Where **TransformED** can provide support is by ensuring young people are well-educated, well-supported and equipped with the knowledge and understanding to better navigate life's opportunities and challenges.

Myth 9: TransformED does not value alternative provision or training pathways

REALITY: This is simply not the case. Education Other Than At School (EOTAS), alternative provision, youth-based interventions and training pathways beyond school are an essential part of a responsive and inclusive education system.

For some children and young people, these settings provide the specialist support, flexibility and personalised approaches needed to help them engage, achieve and thrive. **TransformED** fully recognises and values their important contribution.

However, we must also recognise that too many children are currently reaching the point of disengagement after years of struggling with literacy, language and numeracy. By the time problems become visible, the gap can be substantial and difficult to close. The current education system has not worked well for these children. We need a renewed and evidence-based approach to the teaching of literacy and numeracy.

TransformED is therefore not about replacing alternative provision. It is about reducing the number of children who

need it because the mainstream system did not provide strong enough foundations in the first place.

The goal is simple: ensure that every young person has access to the pathway that best meets their needs, while helping more children succeed in mainstream education from the earliest stages.

Myth 10: Learning styles are evidence-based and TransformED is wrong to challenge them

REALITY: Many people have heard of visual, auditory and kinaesthetic learners. The problem is that decades of research have found little evidence that pupils learn better when teaching is matched to a supposed learning style.

For example, the landmark review by Pashler, McDaniel, Rohrer and Bjork (2009) examined the evidence for learning styles and concluded there is no adequate evidence base to justify incorporating learning-styles assessments into general educational practice. They found that very few studies met the necessary scientific standards and that the evidence did not support matching instruction to learning styles.

Children may have preferences about how they like to learn, but preferences are not the same as effective learning. A pupil may enjoy watching a video more than reading a text, but that does not mean video is always the most effective way for them to learn.

The learning styles debate often confuses three different things:

- learning styles (the idea that people learn best through a particular mode such as visual or auditory);
- learning preferences (what pupils enjoy or feel comfortable with);
- instructional methods (the approaches most likely to help pupils learn specific content).

The most important question is not how a pupil prefers to learn, but what is being learned. Different types of knowledge and skill require different pedagogical approaches. Learning to decode words, conduct a science experiment, analyse a historical source, perform a piece of music or interpret a map all require different forms of teaching because the content itself is different.

Different subjects require different pedagogical approaches. The question is what method is most effective for learning the content being taught. Good teaching adapts to the subject, not to a learning-style label.

This reflects a broader principle: pupils learn through thinking about and engaging with content. What matters is helping pupils pay attention to important ideas, process them meaningfully, practise them when required and retrieve them over time. The focus should be on the design of instruction and the content being learned, not on matching teaching to supposed learning styles.

The Bottom Line

TransformED is built on a simple principle: every child deserves access to a world-class education, regardless of their background, postcode or circumstance.

The programme is not about importing policies from elsewhere, lowering expectations, removing creativity or imposing change for its own sake. It is about responding to evidence, investing in teachers, strengthening literacy and numeracy, modernising the curriculum and ensuring that all children develop the knowledge and skills they need to thrive.

People will disagree on aspects of reform. That is healthy. However, the debate should be based on what **TransformED** actually proposes, not on myths about what it does not.

It is also important to recognise that **TransformED** is only one part of a wider programme of education reform. The Department is also progressing significant work in areas including special educational needs, behaviour and attendance, emotional health and wellbeing.