

**Department of Finance
Memorandum on the Tenth
Report from the
Public Accounts Committee
Mandate 2017-2022**

**Closing the Gap – social deprivation and links
to educational attainment**

**Presented to the Northern Ireland Assembly
by the Minister of Finance**

22 April 2024



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Glossary of Abbreviations

ALB	Arm's Length Body
CFS	Common Funding Scheme
DE	Department of Education
EA	Education Authority
ESaGS	Every School a Good School
ETI	Education and Training Inspectorate
FSME	Free School Meal Entitlement
ITE	Initial Teacher Education
PIRLS	Progress in International Reading Literacy Study
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
PQH	Professional Qualification for Headship
RED	Reducing Educational Disadvantage
RCFS	Review of the Common Funding Scheme
SDS	School Development Service
SEN	Special Educational Needs
SIPP	School Improvement Professional Partner
TIMMS	Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study
TPL	Teacher Professional Learner
WRAP	Education Wraparound Programme

DEPARTMENT OF FINANCE MEMORANDUM DATED 22ND APRIL 2024 ON THE 10TH REPORT FROM THE PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMITTEE MANDATE 2017-2022

Tenth Report

Department of Education

Closing the Gap – social deprivation and links to educational attainment

PAC Recommendation 1

The Committee recommends that the Department and the EA review how funds to target social need and address educational underachievement are provided to schools. The review should assess the current funding mechanism, how funding is used by schools to target those most in need and the impact of the funded interventions. The Committee also expects that, where appropriate, school-led flexibility is provided to allow further autonomy in the use of SEN funds.

The Department of Education (DE) accepts this recommendation.

Funds to target social need and address educational underachievement are provided to schools primarily through the Common Funding Scheme (CFS). Additionally, a number of other funding sources are available for schools to draw upon if they are eligible. For example, the Extended Schools Programme, which has been in place since 2006, provides funding for a range of activities including homework clubs, breakfast clubs, literacy and numeracy support and so on. Eligibility is determined by Free School Meal Entitlement (FSME) and/or area based multiple deprivation criteria. Other programmes include Full Service Programmes in north and west Belfast and a number of geographical interventions such as the Education Wraparound Programme (WRAP) in other areas of significant deprivation.

The Education Authority's (EA) School Development Service (SDS) in exercising its challenge and intervention function, has a formal role to play in monitoring the impact of Targeting Social Need (TSN) spend and other funded interventions on addressing educational underachievement. This will be taken forward through targeted, recorded discussions between the School Improvement Professional Partner (SIPP) and their assigned school and through more active monitoring of the School Development Plans.

DE established an Education Transformation Programme in 2018-19 to review aspects of the existing education system to identify where improvements could be made and deliver a managed programme of transformation for the benefit of children and young people. This included a Review of the Common Funding Scheme (RCFS). In March 2020 however, the then Education Minister, suspended the Transformation Programme, including the RCFS project, due to the COVID-19 pandemic and staff were redeployed to business-critical areas.

The then Education Minister, closed the Programme in March 2021 due to funding uncertainty, the continuing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and linkages with the Independent Review of Education which began in October 2021. The Independent Review of Education published its final report in December 2023 which DE is considering.

In terms of Special Educational Needs (SEN) funds, schools currently have flexibility within their delegated budgets to direct available resources to SEN related activity. Since 2020-21 DE has provided additional funding directly to schools in preparation for the new SEN Framework. This allows for further flexibility at a school level to maximise the use of resources to support children with SEN through the development of Personal Learning Plans and dedicated funding for Learning Support Co-ordinators.

The EA's Statutory Assessment & Review Service also works closely with individual schools to support flexible approaches to SEN provision where the need for this is indicated. School-led flexibility to allow further autonomy in the use of SEN funds will be addressed as part of the SEND Strategic Development Programme.

PAC Recommendation 2

The Committee recommends that the Department completes its review of the suitability of the Free School Meal Entitlement as the measure of social disadvantage as soon as possible to ensure that the most appropriate measure is being used and support is provided to those pupils who need it most.

DE accepts this recommendation.

A review of FSME as the measure of social disadvantage was recommended within the report “A Fair Start” - “DE should review its measurement of deprivation by commissioning an independent research project regarding alternative deprivation measures to FSME in the 2021/22 academic year”. Ulster University was appointed to take forward this review of FSME as a measure of deprivation. The review has been completed and was presented to the Fair Start Programme Board on 27 February 2024. It was published on the DE website on 21 March 2024.

Separately, DE is also undertaking a review of Free School Meal and Uniform Grant eligibility criteria. This review is considering a number of options including the options for universal free school meal provision for certain year groups or all pupils and raising the income thresholds that apply to some eligibility criteria. The launch of a public consultation has been deferred in light of DE’s very challenging budgetary position. A detailed business case is now being developed for the options.

PAC Recommendation 3

The Committee recommends that the Department ensures that all schools provide information on the use of TSN funding and Key Stage assessment data to enable the Department to develop effective guidance and policies and allocate resources to those areas that will lead to better outcomes for pupils. This should include consideration of what action needs to be taken to ensure schools comply.

DE accepts this recommendation.

The then Education Minister, wrote to schools in September 2021 to ask them to complete Section 1 to 3 (forward look) of the TSN Planner in order to capture what they were planning to spend their TSN resources on in 2021-22. Schools were then asked to complete Sections 4 and 5 (retrospective look) on their actual use of TSN funding in the 2021/22 academic year. This described to what extent targets set have been met and progress achieved. Reminders were issued at the appropriate time to encourage schools to comply and provide this information. At that point, 800 schools had completed the TSN Planner which represented approximately 80 per cent of all settings.

In the 2023/24 academic year, the TSN Planner Report accounts for £75 million investment in schools. The ongoing industrial action is having a significant impact on the collection of TSN data. As at 11 January 2024, completion of the TSN Planner 2023/24 is currently 10 per cent of all settings (64 primary and 43 post-primary) as a result of action short of strike. This accounts for £9.4 million of the £75 million budget and more than 56,000 pupils. Schools to date have identified 501 areas targeted for improvement. These include literacy, numeracy, complex needs, barriers to learning Key Stage 1 and 2 results, mental health issues, achievement of particular groups, attendance and so on.

Statutory Key Stage Assessment has been suspended since 2020 to relieve the burden on schools during the pandemic. Prior to 2020, the teaching unions included industrial action in respect of assessment arrangements as part of their wider dispute. Industrial action, has had a significant impact on the operational implementation of the Key Stage assessment arrangements. Further to the teacher Workload Agreement when industrial action ended in 2020, DE is committed to undertaking a full review of statutory Key Stage Assessment and implementation of new arrangements. The aim will be to co-design arrangements with stakeholders across the education system which will help to enhance the future return of data and include appropriate follow-up action to achieve compliance by schools. Schools will continue to monitor and track the attainment of individual pupils using their own internal tracking processes. This review remains a strategic priority and approval has been given for a Review of Statutory Assessment Team to be created within DE, subject to available/required resource. End of Key Stage Statutory Assessments continue to be suspended pending the Review of Statutory Assessment.

PAC Recommendation 4

The Committee recommends that the Department identifies what actions are required to achieve existing Key Stage targets and ensures that these actions are implemented and targets are achieved.

DE partially accepts this recommendation which is linked to Recommendation 3 and associated actions.

As reflected under recommendation 3, Statutory Key Stage Assessment has been suspended since 2020; it continues to be suspended pending the Review of Statutory Assessment.

The scale of the disruption to teaching and learning in Northern Ireland since March 2020 was unprecedented and the impact on children and young people was severe and significant. International research evidence suggested that despite provision of remote learning, students experienced significant learning loss due to school closures and a reduction of in-school instruction time. There was both an absolute reduction in learning levels and less progress than would be expected in a typical year.

Learning loss was particularly severe for children from disadvantaged backgrounds and disruption has widened existing inequalities. There was clear evidence internationally of widening disparities along lines of socio-economic background and race, and students who speak English as an additional language, and those with special educational needs and disabilities, were disproportionately affected.

This means that existing Key Stage targets set prior to the pandemic are no longer relevant or appropriate. DE will develop new arrangements for statutory assessment, including appropriate targets, and will monitor progress to help identify any further actions that may be required.

A review of school improvement is being taken forward using an active end-to-end analysis approach. This will provide an opportunity to fundamentally consider DE policy in relation to school improvement, an opportunity to refresh the focus on raising standards and most critically ensure alignment of a range of key policy areas to ensure positive outcomes.

DE is however unable to accept that it ensures targets are achieved as it is impossible to guarantee that as a result of the actions it takes that targets will actually be achieved.

PAC Recommendation 5

The Committee recommends that the Department and the EA put in place a measurable, time-bound target to address the attainment gap and ensure that challenging targets to address the attainment gap are included in each school's development plan.

DE partially accepts this recommendation.

As reflected under recommendation 4, the scale of the disruption to teaching and learning in Northern Ireland since March 2020 was unprecedented and the impact on children and young people severe and significant. Learning loss was particularly severe for children from disadvantaged backgrounds and disruption widened existing inequalities.

DE is currently exploring a number of potential approaches to measuring learning loss across the system and this will inform the development of appropriate targets around the attainment gap at both system and individual school level. Setting appropriate targets will help to raise standards overall and to reduce the attainment gap. However, progress in addressing the attainment gap will be affected by a number of factors, including the long-term impact of Covid-19, the high levels of FSME pupils, ethnic minority pupils and SEN pupils in some schools and, in post-primary schools, the disruption to public examinations since 2020.

In 2021/22, 84.2 per cent of school leavers not entitled to free school meals achieved at least five GCSEs at grades A*-C or equivalent including GCSEs in English and maths, while 59.1 per cent of those entitled to free school meals achieved the same measure.

This represents a gap of 25.1 percentage points between these two groups compared with a gap of 30.0 percentage points between these groups in 2016/17 as reported in Qualifications and Destinations of Northern Ireland School Leavers 2021/22.

It is important to acknowledge that attainment gaps (linked to socio-economic deprivation) are common to education systems across the world and DE is unable to accept that it should put in place time-bound targets to address the attainment gap. DE's target is to reduce the gap as it is not a realistic aim, at system level, to eliminate it on the basis of the current (narrow) GCSE measure.

PAC Recommendation 6

The Committee recommends that the Department establishes a methodology to clearly demonstrate how Sure Start and other early interventions funded by the Department contribute to closing of the attainment gap and provide value for money.

DE has implemented this recommendation.

DE provided a range of evidence to the Northern Ireland Audit Office which demonstrates achievement of educational outcomes and therefore value for money in the use of Sure Start funding in relation to children's attendance at the Programme. Examples of how the impact of Sure Start on children's education and development is currently being measured include:

- Via a range of recognised measurement tools in Sure Start projects;
- Annual evaluation by the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI);
- DE Annual Outcomes Based Accountability Scorecard;
- Parental Survey;
- DE comparison of Children and Young Peoples' Strategic Partnership outcomes - Sure Start/Non Sure Start children;
- Institute for Fiscal Studies 2021 (& 2019) of Health benefits of Sure Start.

DE recognises the importance of identifying the longer-term impact of attending Sure Start and how this may contribute to educational development and closing of the attainment gap. Since 2015-16 DE has had systems in place to identify when a child starts school, whether they attended Sure Start. While not available at present due to industrial action, this information will enable future comparative analysis on educational attainment of Sure Start children throughout their school years. Arrangements are also in place which include Sure Start within the Longitudinal Education Outcomes database being developed by the NI Statistics and Research Agency, which will enable research about career paths of Sure Start children through school to work.

DE continues to consider ways to measure the longer-term educational impact of Sure Start and other DE funded early programmes.

PAC Recommendation 7

The Committee recommends that the Department and the EA put in place appropriate mechanisms for the identification and dissemination of current educational best practice, including international best practice, and that support is provided for school leaders to implement appropriate initiatives.

DE has implemented this recommendation.

There are a number of mechanisms in place to identify and disseminate educational good practice. DE's school improvement policy, Every School a Good School (ESaGS), recognises the importance of high quality leadership and teaching in raising educational standards. DE will continue to promote the benefits of ESaGS policy by embedding the characteristics of effective schools through effective leadership; child centered provision; high quality teaching and learning; and a school connected to its community. This effective practice is also reflected in "Count, Read, Succeed", DE's strategy to improve outcomes in literacy and numeracy. Sharing effective practice will also form an important part of the work to be taken forward under the Fair Start report.

Work has commenced on an End to End Review of School Improvement including ESaGS. One of the primary outcomes will be a refreshed school improvement policy which takes into account changes since the original policy was published in 2009 and ensures alignment of various policies and strategies across DE and its Arm's

Length Bodies (ALBs). The review will examine how current policy is operationalised and extent that the intent is realised. The new policy will consider how best practice is shared and celebrated. The ETI, as part of their work on the Development of Inspection, have determined that the new approach will place a stronger emphasis on the identification, reporting and sharing of highly effective practice.

DE continues to fund NI's participation in a range of international studies including Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) and Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) however the latter was unable to progress in 2023 due to an insufficient number of schools willing to participate associated with Action Short of Strike. A seminar for schools on the outcomes of the PIRLS 2021 took place in September 2023 to disseminate the outcomes and learning. PISA 2022 outcomes were also published in December 2023 and a webinar took place on 24 January 2024 to share the learning around how the maths results can be used to inform maths teaching practices.

PAC Recommendation 8

The Committee recommends that the Department and the EA must provide additional support to schools to improve attendance rates so as to ensure pupils from socially deprived backgrounds benefit from educational opportunities and from the funding provided to close the attainment gap.

DE accepts this recommendation.

Regular pupil attendance at school is an on-going challenge which has been significantly impacted by the pandemic. DE and EA colleagues are working together on attendance policy to ensure that it is of practical help to schools and will help to communicate to families and communities the importance of this issue.

In light of the on-going concerns regarding the very high-level of pupil absence, DE held an Attendance Summit on 25 October 2023 where presentations from a young person, a mum and a number of school leaders focused on the issues associated with school absence. As a result, DE is taking forward a number of actions this year including: updating its Attendance Strategy; revision of DE Good Practice Guide on Improving Pupil Attendance; creation of an online repository highlighting effective practice; continued use of social media to promote key messages; publication of in-year attendance data; on-going provision of emotional health and wellbeing support and promotion of the use of Restorative Practice in schools.

Management attendance statistics at 30 November 2023, suggest that there has been a 6.2 per cent point improvement in regular attendance for the September to December 2023 period compared with the same period last year.

PAC Recommendation 9

The Committee recommends that the Department and the wider Executive ensure that there is appropriate investment in the training and development of teaching staff, especially those in socially deprived areas, to address educational underachievement and the wider implications of social deprivation on pupil well-being.

DE accepts this recommendation.

The need for teacher professional learning and support for school leaders in their development was identified within the report "A Fair Start". Actions to be taken forward include the need for the "Learning Leaders" policy to facilitate investment in a high-quality Teacher Professional Learner (TPL) framework across Initial Teacher Education (ITE), Induction and TPL for all teachers. This will provide a continuum of opportunities to develop specialist knowledge and skills in tackling underachievement, particularly in socially deprived areas, and a commitment to build leadership capacity at all levels, by developing a collaborative co-designed model with school principals to share effective practice on tackling educational underachievement.

The development and implementation of the EA TPL framework will enable the realisation of the Departmental School Improvement and TPL policies and strategies. The framework will explicitly demonstrate the continuum of opportunities and programmes of support available to teachers as they develop competencies and expertise at a time and pace suitable for them. Providing access to quality assured professional learning with the opportunity

to pursue accreditation, self-directed learning and collaboration is being realised through collaborative partnerships with organisations such as the Chartered College of Teaching, the Association of Education Advisers and the local Higher Education Institutes.

In addition, an EA learning and development programme to help schools meet the needs of pupils with additional and special educational needs is available and work is underway to develop this in relation to nurture, trauma informed practice and restorative practice which will also help to address the wider implications of social deprivation on pupil wellbeing.

DE would highlight, that funding for education is under significant pressure going forward and that further training and development of teachers is dependent on funding being provided by the Executive. Nevertheless, significant support continues to be provided to schools despite ongoing budgetary pressures. This spans support for Early Career Teachers (to complete Induction and Early Professional Development), Teacher Tutors (to fully develop the role of tutors in school in supporting Early Career Teachers) through to Middle Leaders (Association of Education Advisers and other middle leader development opportunities) to name but a few. A replacement Professional Qualification for Headship (PQH) is also being progressed to fill the gap left by the former Professional Qualification for Headship Northern Ireland.

PAC Recommendation 10

The Committee recommends that the Department and the EA ensure that Principals and Governors are supported and developed to be more effective in their leadership roles, especially in relation to the management of school finances and the attainment of required outcomes.

DE accepts this recommendation.

In line with the commitments set out in “Learning Leaders”, EA is aligning TPL Programmes to a leadership continuum that will enable teachers to progress in their leadership competence at different phases of their career, developing at a pace relevant and appropriate to their needs. Within this continuum, school leaders will have access to a comprehensive menu of career long development programmes that will exemplify and expect continuous self-directed learning focused on school improvement. EA will facilitate school leaders in the development of management skills in financial planning and effective use of resources.

A replacement Professional Qualification for Headship is being progressed to fill the gap left by PQHNI. This will complement the range of middle leadership training provided by the EA whilst also providing essential development on the practicalities of headship for existing and aspiring Principals.

DE is planning a review of the existing support mechanisms for Boards of Governors which will consider the current governance support arrangements in relation to recruitment, training and guidance across a range of areas including the management of school finances. Priority policy areas of vetting, two-terms rule and training are approaching completion alongside early consideration of other policy areas. Remaining areas under themes Recruitment and Learning & Development are under consideration. The online governor application portal has been successfully launched and the revised Governor Guide issued to all schools. Further engagement with stakeholders is anticipated in early 2024.

EA will build the capacity and challenge function of governors by ensuring that they have access to a programme of leadership development that supports their responsibilities in school financial management, effective staff recruitment and school improvement.

PAC Recommendation 11

The Committee recommends that the Department and the EA urgently review the current impact of the ETI and the School Improvement Team on improving educational attainment and how this impact can be maximised to contribute to closing the attainment gap. It is further recommended that the EA review the capacity and capability of its School Improvement Team and strengthen it where appropriate.

DE accepts this recommendation.

DE, in conjunction with ETI, will consider how the development of a new inspection strategy following an extended period of action short of strike by teacher unions can maximise the contribution of all stakeholders to supporting improved outcomes for all learners. The Inspectorate undertook capacity building work with schools in Spring 2022, and an extensive consultation and engagement exercise with all education stakeholders on the development of the inspection strategy for implementation in September 2022.

New inspection models and associated guidance have been developed across all inspection phases. The outcomes of the prototype inspections have been analysed and used to inform the pilot inspections which have taken place across work-based learning, youth and early years. Regrettably, no pilot inspections have taken place as yet in any primary or post-primary schools, due to the ongoing industrial action. A collaborative working group, involving senior officials from ETI, EA, Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) and DE, has been established to take forward post-inspection follow-on and follow-up work. This will include strategies to disseminate the highly effective practice identified during inspections.

The EA School Improvement Team are developing a Performance Framework to measure the impact of their work in supporting schools improve the quality of learning experiences and raise standards for all children and young people.

PAC Recommendation 12

The Committee recommends that funding is provided by the Department and wider Executive to implement the Expert Panel’s recommendations in full and that appropriate mechanisms are put in place to monitor and report on the efficiency and effectiveness of the funding. In addition, the Department should clearly define the future role to be played by the Expert Panel in supporting the implementation of the Action Plan to ensure it achieves the outcomes envisaged. Such a role might involve provision of assurance to the Implementation Committee that recommendations are being implemented as envisaged by the Expert Panel.

DE partially accepts this recommendation.

DE has put in place mechanisms to monitor the delivery of the Fair Start actions including a Programme Board and Stakeholder Reference Group and these will be supported by specific project boards to take forward the programmes and projects that follow. DE has committed to provide six monthly reports to the Executive (the Implementation Committee) and NI Assembly each year.

DE would highlight that the Expert Panel’s formal role ended on 1 June 2021. However, “A Fair Start” Senior Responsible Owners continue to meet Quarterly with the Expert Panel to provide them with an update on key aspects of the report. The updates provided by DE have been received positively by panel members however they have expressed a desire to see the Fair Start Actions implemented and funded as outlined in the report.

It is also important to highlight that the former Education Minister secured the endorsement by Executive colleagues of the report “A Fair Start”. Funding decisions and balancing priorities however are a matter for the Executive through established procedures and therefore DE is unable to accept the recommendation that the necessary funding will be made available. Nevertheless, funding allocated to “A Fair Start” to date totals £13.7 million, but overall funding for education remains extremely challenging in the current climate.

PAC Recommendation 13

The Committee recommends that mechanisms are established to ensure a collaborative approach is taken to address the issues identified in this report and deliver its recommendations. This activity should be led by the Department of Education and the Education Authority and should ensure appropriate joint working with schools, other NI Departments, community groups, local government and other organisations as required.

DE accepts this recommendation.

The importance of collaboration is captured within the report “A Fair Start”. DE and EA are leading on this work and recognise that joint-working will be essential to deliver on the recommendations. Therefore, the Programme Board comprises representatives from a wide range of government departments and ALB and a

Stakeholder Reference Group which includes school representatives, DE, EA, CCMS, voluntary and community sector, youth sector, early years and uniformed organisations.

NI Civil Service officials are increasingly working on a cross-departmental, cross-collaborative basis across a range of policy areas. The Reducing Educational Disadvantage (RED) Programme (a locally-based Programme involving schools and communities) is continuing to be developed in collaboration with stakeholders across central and local government, the voluntary and community sector, schools and communities.

The Stakeholder Reference Group which consists of approximately 35 different stakeholders has been very helpful and has played a key role in the development of the RED policy since its inception. Budget permitting, a number of potential pilot areas and a number of cross-cutting themes will form the main content of the RED Programme.

DE is also one of a number of departments involved in a Collaborative Test and Learn Programme commissioned by Permanent Secretaries Group to determine how more effective collaboration can be achieved across government and the voluntary and community sector. That work is continuing.