



An Roinn Oideachais
Department of Education

Chief Inspector's Report September 2016- December 2020

Executive Summary

The Inspectorate
Department of Education
March 2022

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

The *Chief Inspector's Report 2016-2020* provides an analysis of, and reflection on, the quality of education provision in schools and other education settings in Ireland during the period 2016 to 2020. The report considers the findings from inspection, advisory and research work carried out by Department of Education inspectors in a range of education contexts, including primary schools, special schools, post-primary schools, the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Programme, centres for education and other types of education provision. It also encompasses the work of education settings during the COVID-19 period.

It is intended to publish the report at an event on 23 March 2022 at 13.00 in the Clock Tower, Department of Education.

The report:

- Describes the context of the educational system over the period to which the report applies
- Outlines the role and organisation of the Inspectorate and key developments in how the Inspectorate carried out its work in a range of education settings from 2016-2020
- Highlights key strengths and key areas for development identified during inspections, research and advisory work in a range of education contexts including primary schools, special schools, post-primary schools, the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Programme, centres for education and other types of education provision
- Provides evaluative commentary on a range of priority education themes including:
 - Special education
 - Social inclusion
 - Partnership with parents and children and young people
 - Leadership and management in schools
 - Implementation of national priorities in primary and post-primary education
- Considers the supports provided for the education system during the pandemic and the main findings arising from research and advisory sessions conducted by the Inspectorate during the school closure period (March-June 2020) and the return to school experience during the early part of the 2020-2021 school year
- Reflects on what the experience of evaluating and supporting the educational system since 2016 may be telling us about the medium and long-term development of educational provision in State-funded schools and other education settings over the next five to ten years.

Chapter 1: The context of the Inspectorate's work

This chapter describes the context of the educational system between 2016 and 2020. It notes the factors and trends that influenced Irish the education system during that period.

KEY MESSAGES

Learners

- During the period September 2016 – December 2020, Irish schools and early learning and care (ELC) settings served a growing number of children and young people overall; a peak has now been reached in the primary sector, but further growth is expected to occur in the post-primary sector until 2026.
- The success of the ECCE programme in the early learning and care sector has had a notable impact on the age at which children start primary school. The consequent impact that this will have on the revision of the primary curriculum, particularly for junior classes, and in the long term on curriculum choices and programmes at Senior Cycle, including provision for vocational educational and training, will need to be considered.
- The active inclusion of student voice in policy-making has been a notable change in educational policy development.
- Pupils at primary level experienced the roll-out of a revised Primary Languages Curriculum, and all first-year students entering post-primary school in 2019/20 were studying the full suite of revised subject specifications introduced as part of Junior Cycle reforms.

Funding

- Funding for the early learning and care (ELC) sector grew significantly in the 2016-2020 period. [First 5](#) commits to reaching funding levels of approximately €1 billion by 2028.
- Expenditure per learner at primary and post-primary levels is in line with OECD averages.
- Investment in the DEIS scheme has continued to rise; from €110m to €125m.
- Significant growth has occurred in expenditure to support learners with special educational needs from just over €1.5 billion to just over €2 billion.

Teachers and early years educators

- The numbers of early years educators and teachers have grown. Most of the growth in teacher numbers is accounted for by the demographic growth in student numbers and increased provision for children with special educational needs.
- Despite growing numbers of early years educators and teachers in the system, recruitment and staff retention remain a challenge at all levels.
- A range of actions is being implemented to increase diversity in the teaching profession and to meet teacher supply challenges.

Investing in a high quality teaching workforce

- National policies and initiatives have continued to seek to strengthen the professional education and standing of teachers and early years educators.

- The Government's *First 5* policy has set out a highly ambitious vision for a graduate-led workforce of 50% of early years educators by 2028. Important initial steps have been taken to achieve this goal, with publication of *Nurturing Skills* in 2021. Progress has been made in the implementation of reforms in initial teacher education for primary and post-primary teachers, and new teacher education programmes have been established for the Gaeltacht and Irish-medium education sector.
- There has been considerable investment in continuing professional development for early years educators and teachers.
- The Teaching Council's induction programme, *Droichead*, became available for all newly qualified teachers, replacing the inspection-based probationary process that had been in place for many years.
- While the key focus of continuing professional development (CPD) is on the implementation of national policies, the support services are providing increased levels of bespoke school-based CPD.
- Classroom teaching time in Ireland, while greater than the OECD average, is impacted by teachers' involvement in CPD and the delivery of examinations.
- The Teaching Council advanced several measures relating to the professionalism of teachers, including an induction programme for all newly qualified teachers, the publication of a framework for recognising and promoting teachers' ongoing professional learning, and the holding of Fitness-to-Teach hearings.

Educational policy

- The Department of Education's [Action Plan for Education 2016-2019](#) set the overall policy framework for the development of the Irish educational system for the period. *First 5* (2019-2028) set the overall policy framework for ELC.
- The Department of Education launched a range of national initiatives for schools and placed considerable emphasis on Gaeltacht education, STEM education, creativity, digital technologies, education for sustainable development, and wellbeing.
- The introduction of these key strategies addressed several areas where curricular development was needed. However, the simultaneous implementation of a number of strategies in a relatively short period of time posed challenges for schools.

COVID-19 pandemic

- Rapid policy and funding responses were required to assist schools and other education settings to address the needs of students during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Schools and settings had to make very significant changes to their provision and their environments in a rapidly changing environment.

Chapter 2: The Inspectorate and inspection

This chapter describes the organisation of the Inspectorate and outlines some of the key developments in how the Inspectorate carries out its inspection work in schools, early learning and care (ELC) settings and other education settings. It also presents data in relation to the scope of the inspection, research and advisory work completed by the Inspectorate over the period September 2016 to December 2020, and looks at how the Inspectorate monitors improvement in schools and settings, and within the Inspectorate itself.

KEY MESSAGES

Looking at Our School: A quality framework for schools

- The publication of *Looking at Our School 2016 (LAOS)* was a significant innovation. It provides a unified and coherent set of standards for teaching and learning and for leadership and management. It informs both inspection and school self-evaluation (SSE), and promotes shared discourse around the quality of aspects of educational provision.
- Work is ongoing to ensure that the *LAOS* framework remains accessible and relevant.

A greater range of inspection models

- The development of a greater range of models has facilitated greater inspection coverage of schools and early learning and care (ELC) settings, and more focused evaluation in areas such as special educational needs provision in schools.
- The Inspectorate developed specific models to evaluate the provision for learners with special educational needs, and to monitor the implementation of the *Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools 2017*.

Expansion of our advisory role

- The Inspectorate expanded its advisory role in schools; advisory visits have been undertaken in schools participating in a range of Department-funded initiatives, and also to support schools during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Informing policy and curriculum change

- The Inspectorate conducted a range of thematic inspections on education provision for children and young people from early years to the end of Senior Cycle in areas such as Modern Foreign Languages (MFL), Digital learning and STEM. A thematic evaluation on and provision in schools for learners with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) was also carried out. These inspections were designed to report on policy implementation and to inform future policy development.
- The Inspectorate continues to support curriculum change and development across all sectors.

Professional capacity of early years educators

- The capacity of early years educators to engage in professional discourse on quality in early learning and care has developed; this reflected positively on the growing confidence of early years educators to engage with the education focus of the early years education inspection (EYEI) quality framework.

Follow up from inspection

- Findings from surveys following whole-school evaluations (WSEs) were generally positive about the inspection process, although respondents identified some areas, particularly in the post-primary context, as needing development, notably in relation to how inspectors engage with students during inspection. Currently, the Inspectorate is developing its processes for engagement with students during all phases of inspection in schools, and this will help to address this.
- A substantial proportion of the recommendations in inspection reports are being implemented in ELC settings, and in primary and post-primary schools.
- The Inspectorate continued to engage in professional dialogue with stakeholders. The development of the Inspectorate's *Strategic Plan 2020-2022* involved extensive consultation with educational partners.

LOOKING FORWARD

Building on the learning from COVID-19

- We need to ensure that the Inspectorate continues to respond with agility to the changing contexts of schools and settings, particularly in light of the impact of COVID-19.
- We need to place additional emphasis on themes/areas of enquiry in our inspection models, such as wellbeing, anti-bullying and language development, particularly in light of the COVID-19 experience.

Increasing our impact

- To ensure that our work is conducted to the highest professional standards, we should expand the ways in which we quality assure it.
- To maximise the impact of inspections, we should keep our risk-based approach to inspection under review.
- There is scope for us to further refine how we support schools/early learning and care settings that are struggling in significant ways.

Chapter 3: The quality of education provision in the Early Childhood Care and Education Programme

This chapter presents the key findings of evaluations conducted during the period September 2016 to December 2020 in early learning and care (ELC) settings delivering the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Programme. In assessing the quality of education provision in ELC settings, the primary model of inspection used by the Inspectorate is the early years education inspection (EYEI) model which is complemented by early years follow-through inspection. During the period September 2016 to March 2020, the Inspectorate conducted 2,248 EYEIs and 195 follow-through inspections. These included inspections in a number of Irish-medium and Gaeltacht ELC settings.

KEY MESSAGES

- The overall quality of provision in almost all ELC settings is good or better.

Context to support learning

- The majority of pre-schools inspected were characterised by warm, respectful and open relationships with parents and children. More formal approaches to sharing information with parents on their children's learning have yet to be developed in many settings.

Processes to support children's learning and development

- The extension of the ECCE programme to afford children up to two years of free pre-school education has posed additional challenges for settings in meeting the differing needs of individual learners.
- Planning practices for children with additional needs in ELC settings should be developed further to include a greater emphasis on children's individual needs.
- There has been an increase in the use of play-based approaches to learning. However, because of a misperception that it is the role of ELC settings to prepare children for primary school, some settings have adopted an overly-formalised approach to learning.
- The development of emergent, child-centred learning programmes and approaches to assessment, including the use of assessment information to inform the next steps in children's learning, continue to present a challenge in ELC settings.
- There is a good focus on early literacy and numeracy in ELC settings. However, there is potential to improve approaches to support the development of children's communication and higher-order thinking skills.

Children's learning experiences and achievement

- Quality learning experiences in ELC settings were characterised by child-centred approaches which led to high levels of engagement, enjoyment, motivation and achievement among children.
- Where practice required improvement, challenges were most often related to the over-use of adult direction and insufficient opportunities for children to take the lead and use their initiative in activities.

Management and leadership for learning

- Internal review and self-reflection and evaluation practices have yet to be embedded consistently in all ELC settings. Greater emphasis on embedding these processes in ELC settings is required. This is identified as a key priority outlined in the *First 5; A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019-2028*.
- While early years educators use some strategies to support the transition from pre-school to primary school, many ELC settings have yet to establish professional links with their local schools.
- Early years educators demonstrate positive dispositions towards engaging in continuing professional development (CPD). However, additional support for and resources tailored to the development of leadership capacity are a priority.

LOOKING FORWARD

Sharing information with parents

- ELC settings need to be supported in developing approaches that facilitate the formal sharing of information about children's learning with parents.

Supporting children's learning and development

- Consideration needs to be given to the provision of CPD opportunities for ELC providers, particularly in relation to the implementation of an emergent, enquiry-based curriculum, approaches to assessment and differentiated approaches to learning.
- Early years educators in ELC settings should place a greater emphasis on collaborative curriculum/programme planning that supports the provision of a more connected, holistic learning experience for children, and is reflective of children's perspectives and opinions.
- As envisaged in *First 5; A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019-2028*, the Inspectorate will continue to work with the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY), the Tusla Early Years Inspectorate and the Better Start National Quality Development Service to develop a coherent single quality framework, and to better integrate and coordinate inspection and quality supports.

Use of digital technology in ELC settings

- Further research and engagement with the ELC sector should be undertaken to develop guidance regarding best practice in young children's use of digital technology in ELC settings. The ELC sector should also be included in future digital learning strategies.

Supporting the transition from pre-school to primary

- All ELC settings should be supported to establish professional links with their local primary schools in order to facilitate the effective transitioning of children from pre-school to primary education.

Chapter 4: The quality of teaching and learning in primary schools and special schools

This chapter presents the key findings of inspections conducted in primary schools and special schools during the period September 2016 to December 2020. It draws from data gathered during announced inspections, including whole school evaluations (WSE), whole school evaluations-management, leadership and learning (WSE-MLL) and curriculum evaluations. It also draws from data gathered during Incidental Inspections which are typically unannounced and involve the observation of teaching and learning in a number of curriculum areas in up to three learning settings over the course of a school day.

During the September 2016 to December 2020 period, 3,234 lessons were observed in the course of WSE inspections, 7,985 lessons were inspected in the course of WSE-MLL inspections, and 4,376 lessons were inspected during curriculum evaluations. Inspectors also evaluated the quality of teaching and learning, and engaged with pupils about their learning in 6,012 lessons during Incidental Inspections.

This chapter also draws on findings from the Inspectorate's advisory engagements with schools and on research conducted by the Inspectorate on the experience of remote teaching and learning from March-June 2020 when schools were closed. It also includes findings from Inspectorate research on how well schools were operating from September-December 2020 when schools re-opened.

KEY MESSAGES

Achievement

- Irish pupils continued to perform at a high level in international assessments in literacy, Mathematics and Science.

Teaching approaches

- High quality teaching approaches were observed in a majority of lessons.
- Planning and practice in catering for the range of pupil abilities and learning dispositions require further development and should include more active and child-centred teaching approaches.
- In response to COVID-19, there has been a considerable increase in the use of digital technologies in teaching and learning.

Assessment

- While there have been improvements in assessment in many primary schools, particularly in aspects of literacy and numeracy; challenges remain in relation to the implementation of approaches to assessment.
- There is a need for teachers to provide pupils with clearer feedback on their work and on how best to improve their learning, and to enable them to reflect on their learning.

Provision for Irish

- In Gaeltacht primary schools and Gaelscoileanna, the quality of language use in Irish was good overall.
- There remains considerable scope to develop pupils' learning outcomes, motivation and engagement in Irish in English-medium schools. There is evidence that when schools found the introduction of the revised Primary Languages Curriculum challenging, they prioritised the teaching of English in English-medium schools and the teaching of Irish in Irish-medium schools.

Other curriculum provision

- In Social, Environmental and Scientific Education (SESE), teachers make balanced provision for knowledge acquisition and the development of skills. There remains scope to develop pupils' higher-order investigative skills.
- There is a need to support schools in their understanding and promotion of education for sustainable development (ESD).
- There are positive findings in relation to wellbeing and the development of children's understanding of personal safety and bullying in Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE).
- In the Arts, there are examples of enjoyable and rich learning experiences. There is scope to promote pupils' creativity and reflection further.

LOOKING FORWARD

Teaching approaches

- To ensure that all pupils are challenged sufficiently, teachers should develop their approaches to differentiation further.
- To further extend learning beyond the acquisition of knowledge, greater focus should be placed in primary schools and special schools on the development of skills and on fostering positive dispositions towards learning.
- Greater attention to the development and embedding of whole-school assessment strategies is required. Pupils should be provided with more frequent and enhanced opportunities to reflect on their progress as learners.

Language learning

- Pupils' opportunities for language learning and development should be extended more consistently through the use of active and collaborative learning opportunities across all curriculum areas.
- Primary schools need intensive support to enable them to introduce appropriately-challenging, targeted interventions to enhance pupils' attainment, engagement, enjoyment and motivation in Irish language learning.

Learning from the pandemic

- Learning from the COVID-19 pandemic should be built on, particularly with regard to the use of digital technology to support teaching and learning, and in enhancing communication with parents to support their involvement in their child's education.

Co-curricular, cross-curricular and extracurricular activities

- There is a need to explore how the new *Primary Curriculum Framework* can be implemented in a manner that enables schools to extend and embed the provision of effective co-curricular and cross-curricular activities for pupils.
- There is a need to support schools more systematically in their provision of extra-curricular activities. This is in light of the potential of these activities to support pupils' social and emotional development and to extend learning experiences and skills development beyond the curriculum.

Chapter 5: The quality of teaching and learning in post-primary schools

This chapter presents the key findings of inspections conducted in post-primary schools from September 2016 to December 2020. During this period, the [National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People](#), which had been introduced in 2011, became well embedded and revised targets were introduced in 2017. The phased introduction of the new Junior Cycle, introduced in 2014, continued.

This chapter draws from data gathered during announced inspections, including whole-school evaluations: management, leadership and learning (WSE-MLL) and subject inspections. It also draws from data gathered during incidental inspections; these inspections, which are typically unannounced.

During the period September 2016 to December 2020, 6,288 lessons were observed in the course of WSE-MLL inspections and 4,807 lessons during subject inspections. Inspectors also evaluated the quality of teaching and learning, and engaged with students about their learning in 2,530 lessons during incidental inspections. In all lesson observations, a key focus was on evaluating the quality of the learning experience of students.

This chapter also draws on the findings from the Inspectorate's advisory engagements with schools, and on research conducted by the Inspectorate on the experience of remote teaching and learning from March-June 2020 when schools were closed. It also includes findings from Inspectorate research on how well schools were operating from September-December 2020 when schools re-opened.

KEY MESSAGES

Student learning

- Irish students continue to perform well in international assessments in reading, Mathematics and Science; there is scope to improve outcomes for students with higher abilities, including exceptionally-able students.
- The proportion of students studying subjects at higher level has increased steadily in almost all subjects.
- Schools have made good progress in relation to whole-school literacy; vocabulary development and oral literacy were identified as areas for further development in inspections of English.
- The quality of student learning in Irish, while good or very good in the majority of schools, was significantly below the standards achieved in other core subjects.
- Levels of experiential and constructivist learning in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) subjects have increased; some of the findings from international assessments indicate that challenges in the teaching of Mathematics remain.
- Students had high quality learning experiences in Physical Education and Social, Personal and Health Education; such experiences are key to the maintenance and advancement of student wellbeing.

- The additional Guidance and Counselling resources provided in response to the COVID-19 pandemic are a welcome additional support for students; however, further system supports in Guidance and Counselling will be required.

Teaching and assessment

- The *Junior Cycle Framework* is being implemented successfully in many schools; cross-curricular sharing of expertise, focused on inclusive task design and the further alignment of subject department plans with the new subject specifications, are areas for development.
- Challenges remain in relation to how assessment is carried out, how assessment findings are used, and the quality of formative feedback that students receive; COVID-19 led to much new thinking in this area. The implementation of classroom based assessments (CBAs) in Junior Cycle has meant the use of a wider range of assessment approaches and has given teachers opportunities to engage in collaborative discussions and moderation meetings concerning students' achievements.
- High-quality learning environments, and high levels of student enjoyment and motivation are evident in post-primary schools; collaborative learning practices for students require further development.
- The use of information and communications technology as a teaching and learning tool became much more effective during the pandemic, having been underdeveloped prior to the pandemic.

LOOKING FORWARD

Promoting student achievement and better learning

- There is a need for all schools to use approaches that will help to increase the numbers of students achieving at the highest levels and address the needs of more able and exceptionally-able students.
- Whole-school strategies to enhance the quality of subject department planning are required; in particular, subject and programme plans should reflect greater alignment between learning outcomes, pedagogy and assessment.
- Further opportunities for students to engage in talk and discussion and to work collaboratively should be provided in lessons.
- Building on the experience of COVID-19 and the associated changes in assessment practices, schools should evaluate the ways in which assessment is carried out, how assessment data is used and how students are enabled to reflect on their progress as learners.

Provision for Irish

- There is a need for teachers to create additional opportunities for students to use Irish during lessons through their engagement in enjoyable, creative and stimulating tasks and activities; this is critical for effective language acquisition.
- Schools should prioritise action planning for Irish lessons incorporating the use of contemporary resources including digital technology, a range of active methodologies and effective assessment strategies which ensure that students are given regular feedback on their progress as language learners and clear direction on how to improve.

System development

- Curriculum design, teacher education and assessment policy, particularly in Mathematics, other STEM subjects and Business subjects, should take account of the need for students to develop dynamic problem-solving skills that will equip them to compete within a rapidly evolving and increasingly international labour market.
- Continued enhancement of system supports will be required in the area of Guidance and Counselling to address challenges related to recruitment, curriculum and increasing levels of anxiety among students.

Chapter 6: Inclusion

This chapter presents the findings of inspections during the September 2016 to December 2020 period in relation to targeted provision for the inclusion of children and young people with special educational needs (SEN), and those at risk of educational disadvantage. The opening section of the chapter provides an overview of developments related to policy, resource provision and practice in these areas in the 2016-2020 period. The chapter draws on data gathered during focused inspections of SEN provision and inspections of Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) action planning in DEIS schools, as well as whole-school evaluations, curriculum evaluations and subject inspections that were carried out in the 2016-2020 period. It also draws from the findings of inspections of Youthreach centres, and inspections in schools attached to Special Care Units (SCUs) or the Children Detention Centre (CDC), as well as a number of composite reports that the Inspectorate published during this period.

KEY MESSAGES

Unprecedented growth in provision

- The growth in the number of special educational needs teachers has exceeded the growth of pupil/student numbers in schools. This is mainly attributable to the larger proportion of students with special educational needs (SEN) enrolling in post-primary schools.
- The rate of growth in the numbers of special needs assistants (SNAs) in schools has been unprecedented and is greatly in excess of the growth in the student population generally.

Quality of special education provision

- Inspection findings indicate that the quality of teaching of children with special educational needs (SEN) in primary schools is good or very good in most instances.
- During the early phase of implementing the new special education teaching (SET) models, in a minority of the primary and post-primary schools reviewed, additional teaching resources provided for the purposes of assisting the school in meeting the special educational needs of some children were not deployed in accordance with the terms of Circular 13/2017 or Circular 14/2017.
- Because considerably fewer post-primary SEN inspections have been completed, the extent of inspection findings at post-primary level is somewhat more limited. Nonetheless, it is of some concern that the quality of teaching and learning at this level was just satisfactory in a significant minority of the lessons that were observed. Similarly, the gap in reported parental satisfaction with aspects of provision for children with SEN warrants further consideration.
- A number of important aspects that relate to provision for children with autism require attention including enrolment practices, review of placements and the integration of learners attending special classes into mainstream provision.

Quality of DEIS provision

- The quality of leadership of the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) action planning for improvement process in schools requires improvement in a significant minority of schools.
- There is scope to develop DEIS action planning in relation to attendance, particularly in post-primary schools.

- Post-primary schools in the DEIS programme require additional support to assist them in ensuring that data and information available in the schools are used to best effect in the planning process.
- The learning outcomes of pupils in the target group were tracked clearly in only half of the DEIS schools included in the SEN review.
- In DEIS schools, students' attitudes towards Mathematics become more negative as they progress through the school system. Addressing this will require the focused attention of schools and of the teacher support services.
- Support teachers were effective in enhancing educational opportunities for learners with behavioural difficulties, but they need to monitor learners' progress and achievements systematically; their roles and responsibilities also need to be clarified.

Other specialised provision

- The atmosphere and levels of care and pastoral support were reported to be generally very good in Youthreach centres.
- While links between schools attached to special care units (SCUs) and the Children Detention Centre (CDC) and outside agencies were found to be generally good, there is scope to ensure that actions identified in pupils'/students' support plans inform teaching and learning.
- Emergency Reception and Orientation Centres (EROCs) were found to have provided an effective interim response to the educational needs of children and young people. Issues were identified in relation to the transition of pupils/students to, and their integration into local mainstream schools.
- Schools attached to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) units were found to provide holistic and broad curricular and co-curricular programmes but there is scope to develop their planning and assessment practices.

LOOKING FORWARD

SEN policy and supports

- Policy makers and education partners will need to reflect on the effectiveness and inclusiveness of current provision as they plan for Ireland's future response to the obligations arising from the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.
- An induction programme should be established for newly-appointed support teachers to guide them in target setting and the tracking of learner outcomes, and to provide clarity for schools and teachers on the roles, responsibilities and deployment of the support teacher.
- Enrolment policies in classes for pupils/students with autism and other special classes should prioritise places for those with complex needs, and pupils/students with less complex needs should be included in mainstream classes with appropriate support.

Practice in special education settings

- Teachers' collaborative practices, both in planning interventions and in the facilitation of lessons, should be further developed to support the needs of learners with SEN.
- Assessment information should be utilised to greater effect in special education settings as a means of supporting learner progression.

DEIS

- Action planning for improvement in DEIS schools should place additional focus on attendance, examination attainment (post-primary only) and making learning interesting for learners, particularly in the area of numeracy.

Other specialised provision

- Systems to identify, record and communicate the needs of learners in EROCs should be established, in conjunction with the development of learning programmes appropriate to their individual needs and strengths.
- Further sharing of teachers may be required between mainstream Education and Training Board schools and Youthreach centres to ensure that all learners have access to appropriate teaching and learning in as broad a range of curricular areas as possible and that the curriculum can be more fully determined by learner needs.

Chapter 7: Partnerships with parents and learners

This chapter focuses on important partnerships that enhance children's and young people's learning. The first part of this chapter looks at two aspects of these relationships: firstly, the partnerships that schools and settings foster with parents, and secondly, how schools and settings listen and respond to the voices of children/young people and their parents and promote their participation in meaningful ways.

The Inspectorate of the Department of Education is conscious that it, too, must listen to and include the perspectives of children/young people and their parents during inspections, given the valuable and unique insights that they can provide into educational provision in schools and the importance of valuing and respecting their views. We are also looking at how we can improve how we give parents, children and young people information about the quality of the education provided in settings/schools. The second part of this chapter describes this aspect of the Inspectorate's work.

KEY MESSAGES

Partnerships with parents

- Partnership in education is a crucial element of an effective education system. Schools, parents and communities working together in a genuinely participative way can benefit the learning and wellbeing of children and young people in our schools, ELC settings, centres for education and other education settings.
- COVID-19 has highlighted the role that effective partnership and communication between schools and families can have in supporting wellbeing and learning among children and young people.
- There is potential, across ELC settings and schools, to improve aspects of communication and to secure the benefits brought by a strong culture of collaboration and partnership.
- Inspection findings indicate that while ELC settings and schools have established effective practices for sharing information with parents, there is scope to strengthen the role of parents in school governance and decision-making.
- Parental involvement in school self-evaluation (SSE) is an evolving feature of practice. The forthcoming Education (Student and Parent Charter) legislation has potential to support parental engagement in SSE processes to better effect in schools.

Partnership with children and young people

- There is a growing awareness at national, system and setting/school levels of the importance of valuing and facilitating the voice of children and young people.
- There is a need for increased pupil/student participation in decision-making in schools. Inspection surveys indicate that a majority of pupils and students in primary and post-primary schools feel that they do not have a say in how things are done in their school.
- Surveys and focus groups conducted by the Inspectorate during the September to December 2020 period show how pupils and students can provide valuable insights into their learning; such insights are important for schools and the education system.

Parents, learners and inspection

- The meaningful engagement of learners and their parents in education is a key priority for the Inspectorate. The Inspectorate has been working to enhance parents', children's and young people's engagement before, during and after inspection.

LOOKING FORWARD

Communication with parents

- To strengthen communication practices with parents, there is a need for ELC settings to share more information about their children's learning, and a need for more regular communication about the work of primary, special and post-primary schools.
- The potential of digital technology, and our learning from the COVID-19 pandemic, should be harnessed to support effective communications and new forms of partnerships. At the same time, care is needed to ensure that restrictions, which may have been necessary during the pandemic, should not erode or impede effective relationships between schools/settings and parents in the future.

Increasing pupil/student and parent participation

- Pupil/student participation and pupil/student leadership should continue to be promoted and developed at setting and school level. The views of children and young people should be valued, and they should be enabled to have influence in their education experiences and the work of the setting/school.
- ELC settings and schools should continue to promote meaningful engagement and the participation of parents in their child's education.
- Schools should ensure that parents' views are listened to, and that parents are enabled to have influence on the work of the school, including in the context of the Education (Student and Parent Charter) Bill and the guidelines that will be developed subsequent to the enactment of this legislation.
- The Inspectorate will continue to build on its work to increase the engagement of children young people, and parents in inspection processes.

Chapter 8: Leadership and management in schools

This chapter outlines some key findings from inspection relating to the leadership and management of schools in the period 2016-20. It looks at the supports that have been put in place to promote effective leadership and management in schools. Leadership and management for learning in early learning and care (ELC) settings has been considered in Chapter 3. This chapter also comments on what our experience of working with schools and their leaders, as well as the organisations and bodies involved in their management, is telling us about the sustainability of the current arrangements for the management of schools. Finally, it summarises the key messages arising from developments and inspection findings, which are intended to inform the way forward.

KEY MESSAGES

- There was a gradual change in profile of the patronage of primary and post-primary schools between September 2016 and December 2020; the voluntary nature of boards of management continued to create challenges.
- Inspection findings show that clear communication practices and strong cultures of collaboration lie at the heart of effective schools, but they need further development in a minority of schools.
- Self-reflection and self-evaluation practices have evolved; systematic approaches are not yet fully established or embedded in many schools and settings across all sectors.
- Effective leaders and managers communicate well and demonstrate a strong commitment to improving the quality of provision for learners.

LOOKING FORWARD

- Increased pace in diversifying school patronage is required to respond fully to the changing needs of society and a demand for educational provision that is not denominational.
- Alternative governance structures for state-funded schools should be pursued actively with the aim of providing schools with more efficient and systematic supports. The rationalisation of governance structures for children detention centres (CDCs), and special care units (SCUs) should be advanced.
- The Primary Education Forum offers a valuable opportunity for consultation on how existing governance arrangements for schools might be better achieved and developed.
- Those in leadership and management positions in settings and schools, particularly primary schools, need to place a more substantial focus on the leadership of teaching and learning.
- Building on the responsiveness of school leaders and the collaboration across the system to ensure sustained provision of education during the pandemic, there is potential to develop leadership, collaboration, and self-evaluation within and across schools further.

Chapter 9: Implementation of national priorities in primary and post-primary education

Over the period to which this report refers, the Department made major investments in the education sector to improve outcomes for children and young people, to break cycles of disadvantage, to support teachers, and to ensure continuous improvement in schools. This chapter describes key Department initiatives that are linked to the following national priority areas for primary and post-primary education: child protection, Gaeltacht education, Irish-medium education outside the Gaeltacht, Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM), digital learning, creativity, education for sustainable development, modern foreign languages and wellbeing, all of which became a particular focus in education during the period September 2016 to December 2020. The COVID-19 pandemic impacted on their implementation during 2020; some were prioritised while others were delayed. This chapter presents a summary of key findings in relation to these priority areas, especially as they relate to primary and post-primary education. In instances where their implementation was delayed, it has not been feasible to evaluate their outcomes as yet.

KEY MESSAGES

- During the September 2016 to December 2020 period, the introduction of a high number and a broad range of new initiatives presented challenges for schools.

Strategy implementation

- There were considerable advances in the monitoring of child-protection practices and procedures in schools.
- Strengthening Irish-language learning in the Gaeltacht is a core commitment of the Government, and this period saw significant investment and developments in Gaeltacht education.
- Early learning and care (ELC) settings and schools were generally prepared for greater engagement with STEM education. However, there are a number of key areas where the STEM Education Policy Statement 2017-2026 and the STEM Education Implementation Plan 2017-2019 have not had the desired impact in ELC settings and schools.
- The Digital Strategy for Schools provided a rationale and an action plan for integrating digital technologies into teaching and learning; however, the strategy did not reference the ELC sector.
- Inspection findings revealed considerable variation in the extent to which digital technologies were embedded in teaching and learning.
- There are early indications that the range of activities, funded through the Creative Ireland programme to promote creativity in children and young people are progressing well.

Curriculum

- There has been ongoing work to ensure that creativity is reflected adequately in redeveloped curriculum frameworks; a shared understanding of the meaning of creativity in educational contexts is now required.
- In line with the aim of Languages Connect to promote the development of immigrant languages, four new curricular languages were introduced at Senior Cycle: Mandarin Chinese, Polish, Portuguese and Lithuanian.

- Initial steps were taken in the implementation of education for sustainable development (ESD) in schools, with the focus on identifying opportunities to build on existing curriculum practice. The Inspectorate worked to develop and build a shared understanding of ESD, which was a relatively new concept for schools.
- Wellbeing was introduced as a mandatory area of learning in Junior Cycle. Because of school closures associated with COVID-19, schools were enabled to defer increasing their timetabled provision for wellbeing until September 2022. Considerable work has been underway to support schools as they embark on a review of their provision for wellbeing. A review of the Social, Personal and Health Education/Relationships and Sexuality Education curriculum commenced in 2020.

LOOKING FORWARD

- As indicated in the recent commitment to slowing the pace of some curricular changes in light of the pandemic context, the Department needs to reconsider the number and range of national priority areas, and to revise current expectations about the pace and nature of these reforms.
- Schools should ensure full compliance with record-keeping procedures related to child protection.
- The commitments to date to provide support for Gaeltacht education and Irish-medium education outside the Gaeltacht will need to be sustained. There should be active exploration of the opportunities for extending Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) as an approach to promoting the use of Irish among children attending English-medium primary schools in light of the pilot study that has commenced.
- The experience of COVID-19 has highlighted more than ever the important role of schools in the promotion of wellbeing. It is important that schools continue, as outlined in the Department's Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice 2018-2023, to promote wellbeing through the provision of a whole-school, multi-component and preventative approach. It is also important that they avail of the considerable supports and resources provided to support this important work.

Implications for teaching

- Schools need to be supported to further incorporate STEM education methodologies into their practice, and encouraged to implement innovative approaches to STEM.
- A key challenge for the system is to build upon the progress that schools made during the periods of school closure, in order to fully harness the potential of digital technologies to enhance teaching, learning and assessment.
- Policy guidance on the age-appropriate engagement of young children with digital learning, that clarifies expectations for the use of digital technologies, should be developed and implemented across ELC settings.

Implications for curriculum

- There is need for early years educators and teachers to deepen their understanding of the educational power of creativity, critical thinking and innovation, and the multiple ways in which creativity can be promoted in teaching and learning.
- Early years educators and teachers need to be given clearer guidance about how to implement ESD through the various curriculum areas, so that they can help children and young people develop knowledge, skills, competences and values around sustainability.
- The ongoing review of SPHE curricula provides an opportunity to strengthen an integrated approach to SPHE from primary through to Senior Cycle.

Chapter 10: The experience of COVID-19

This chapter focuses on both the initial closure of schools during March to June 2020, and the return to school in September 2020. It outlines the supports provided by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth and other agencies to assist early learning and care settings during 2020. It also outlines the supports that were provided by the Department of Education, including the Inspectorate, to support teaching and learning during school closures and to enable them to reopen safely and resume teaching and learning. The chapter looks at the many ways in which the Inspectorate adapted to the pandemic and continued to support the work of schools and settings. It also presents the main findings from advisory sessions and research conducted by the Inspectorate during both phases.

KEY MESSAGES

- The pace of change that was experienced in the education system during the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrates that education reform can happen more rapidly than we may have thought previously.
- The Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth and the Department of Education provided an extensive range of financial supports and other resources to assist early learning and care settings and schools during the period of school and setting closures and as they reopened.
- The continued work of the Teacher Supply Working Group to enhance the supply of substitute teachers and the planned employment of additional substitute teachers on supply panels are to be welcomed.

During school closures

- During the period of school closures, schools reported considerable success in engaging with the majority of pupils and students in mainstream schools and demonstrated high levels of adaptability.
- While schools were closed, there were significant challenges in engaging pupils and students who were most at risk of educational disadvantage.
- Parents reported gaps in the provision of developmental feedback to pupils and students on the quality of their work.
- The ability of a high proportion of schools, particularly at primary level and in special school settings, to engage with pupils and students in the online environment was underdeveloped.

When schools reopened

- The reopening of schools in September 2020 was achieved through the extraordinary efforts of school leaders and whole school communities, and was supported by an extensive suite of financial and advisory supports provided by the Department of Education
- Overall, schools and Youthreach centres operated in a safe and sustainable way during September to December 2020.
- The Inspectorate's re-engagement with early learning and care (ELC) settings included the development of the Insights: Quality in Education webinar series, which facilitated the sharing of findings, ideas and examples of effective practice from ELC settings.
- Despite significant efforts to increase the supply of substitute teachers in the system, principals continued to experience significant difficulty in covering COVID-related teacher absences.

- Many schools were successful in broadening the range of teaching approaches experienced by pupils and students when schools reopened, including enhanced use of digital technologies; there were some challenges in relation to providing feedback to pupils and students on their progress and in engaging pupils and students in collaborative learning and practical learning activities.
- Addressing gaps in learning as a result of the period of school closures was reported by schools as a significant concern.
- The safe operation of schools and the delivery of key projects, such as calculated grades, were made possible through a spirit of collaboration and co-working between all education stakeholders.

LOOKING FORWARD

System

- The education system and schools should continue to leverage the agility and responsiveness demonstrated during the COVID-19 pandemic as they continue to initiate and implement educational reform.
- Enhancing the supply of substitute teachers should continue to be a priority for the Department.
- Schools and the Department should endeavour to ensure that the challenges to wellbeing and anxiety, experienced by pupils and students as a result of school closures, is acknowledged and addressed.
- The increased capacity of schools and teachers to use digital technologies to support learning that has come about because of the COVID-19 pandemic presents important opportunities. Schools should continue to build upon the improvements that have taken place in this short period of time.

Support for pupils and students

- Finding new and enhanced strategies for providing pupils and students with feedback on their progress, whether in face-to face or remote learning contexts, should be prioritised by schools.
- Schools should continue to identify where the most significant gaps in learning have occurred as a result of the period of school closures, and should engage in action planning to address these gaps in a systematic manner; in doing so, it is vital that the needs of the most vulnerable pupils and students are prioritised.
- The increased capacity of schools and teachers to use digital technologies to support learning that has come about because of the COVID-19 pandemic presents important opportunities. Schools should continue to build upon the improvements that have taken place in this short period of time.

Chapter 11: Looking forward

This chapter attempts to step back further and reflect on what the experience of evaluating and supporting the educational system may be telling us about the medium and long-term development of educational provision in State-funded schools and settings catering for children and young people over the next five to ten years. It reflects on what we have learned and the potential way forward in relation to:

- Tackling the legacy of COVID-19
- Early learning and care
- Curriculum
- Inclusion and diversity
- Early years educators, teachers, setting and school leaders
- Governance and leadership in the school system
- Inspection and evaluation