

Executive Summary

The Republic of Ireland has a history of high reading scores in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), and is a country with many cultural similarities to the four UK nations (England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland). This report focuses on reading policy in the Republic of Ireland, using data from PISA, policy reviews, surveys, and interviews with key policy stakeholders, to explore what can be learned for the UK.

This research brief summarises the key lessons that can be learned from reading policy in the Republic of Ireland and trends in the PISA 2018 data. The report draws on a number of data sources, including policy analysis, surveys of policy experts in the four UK nations and the Republic of Ireland, interviews with policy experts in the Republic of Ireland and analysis of PISA data. This report complements the simultaneous analysis PISA 2018 additional analyses: What differentiates disadvantaged pupils who do well in PISA from those who do not? (Classick *et al.*, 2021).

The full report is available to download from the NFER's website:

www.nfer.ac.uk/using-PISA-2018-to-inform-policy-learning-from-the-republic-of-Ireland

Research questions

This report focused on reading performance in PISA in the four UK nations and the Republic of Ireland to answer five questions:

1. How does the Republic of Ireland's PISA reading performance compare to the UK nations'?
2. How has PISA reading performance changed over time in the UK nations and the Republic of Ireland?
3. What are the key policies aimed at increasing reading performance in the Republic of Ireland?
4. What has been the impact of policies aimed at increasing reading attainment in the Republic of Ireland?
5. Have the factors associated with good reading attainment in PISA changed since 2009?

Report structure

The report is structured as follows.

- Chapter 1 introduces the research questions, gives background to the research and provides context on how PISA performance has changed over time in the UK nations and the Republic of Ireland.

- Chapter 2 outlines the reading policy context in the four UK nations and provides perspectives on successful implementation of these policies gathered from surveys of policy experts in the relevant nations.
- Chapter 3 provides the reading policy context in the Republic of Ireland and provides perspectives on successful implementation of these policies gathered from surveys of policy experts. It also contains detailed thematic commentary from interviews with senior educational professionals in the Republic of Ireland, focused on their experience of policy history, policy development and implementation, and their reflections on the reasons behind their success in reading.
- Chapter 4 provides discussion of the collated data from the previous chapters. We look at reasons behind the differing PISA results for various subjects in the Republic of Ireland, explore the factors associated with better reading attainment and consider differences between the Republic of Ireland and the UK nations.
- Chapter 5 draws together the key findings and lessons that can be applied more widely.

Key findings

How does the Republic of Ireland's PISA reading performance compare to the UK nations'?

In PISA 2018, 15 year old pupils in the Republic of Ireland achieved significantly higher scores for reading literacy than their counterparts in the UK. The pattern of higher achievement was consistent across all the PISA reading cognitive processes of locating, understanding and evaluating, whether reading single or multiple texts, with no nation showing particular strengths or weaknesses.

Compared to the other four nations, the Republic of Ireland had a smaller proportion of pupils working at the lowest PISA reading proficiency levels, whilst also having a high proportion working at the higher levels.

How has PISA reading performance changed over time in the UK nations and the Republic of Ireland?

With the exception of 2009, the Republic of Ireland has scored significantly above the UK nations in PISA reading literacy since 2006. Its 2009 performance is considered by researchers in the Republic of Ireland to be anomalous. Reading scores in the four UK nations have remained stable since 2006, the only exception being a dip in Scotland in 2015. None of the five nations in this study have significantly improved their reading score compared with PISA 2006.

The Republic of Ireland has consistently had a significantly lower proportion of pupils performing below the benchmark of basic literacy, PISA Level 2, than UK nations. It has also had comparatively high proportions of pupils achieving the highest proficiency levels. In PISA 2018, England had a similar proportion of high achieving pupils to the Republic of Ireland but, like all other UK nations, it also had a higher percentage of pupils at the lowest levels.

What are the key policies aimed at increasing reading performance in the Republic of Ireland?

In the Republic of Ireland, two major policy initiatives were identified by policy experts as the most important for driving reading improvement: Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS, pronounced ‘desh’, Irish for ‘opportunity’) launched in 2005, and the National Strategy: Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life 2011–2020.

DEIS was introduced when the PISA 2018 cohort was between two and three years old and was designed to build upon and integrate previous policies aimed at disadvantaged pupils into a single policy. Many of the previous policy initiatives contained within DEIS, such as the Home School Community Liaison programme have existed in some form since the 1980s. The plan identifies and targets policies at a range of rural and urban schools that are considered to be most disadvantaged, providing a range of available interventions, including additional literacy and numeracy support, teacher professional development services and additional funding, some of which schools may select and implement at their discretion.

The National Strategy was introduced in 2011 and in many ways was a response to the 2009 dip in PISA performance. It contained six major pillars focusing on engagement with parents and the community, reforms of teaching and teacher training, a focus on leadership, changes to the curriculum, efforts to tackle educational disadvantage, and changes to assessment and evaluation within schools. Importantly, the priorities within the National Strategy are also linked to and build upon previous policy changes, including DEIS.

What has been the impact of policies aimed at increasing reading attainment in the Republic of Ireland?

Evaluations of DEIS by the Republic of Ireland government and educational research organisations have found that it has increased reading assessment scores in enrolled primary schools and attendance in almost all primary schools and half of post-primary schools. Longitudinal analyses have recorded that there has also been a slight, but significant, narrowing of the gap between DEIS and non-DEIS schools at post-primary level. An interim review of the National Strategy noted the first significant improvements in reading test scores in nearly 30 years.

In our interviews, policy experts from the Republic of Ireland indicated key reasons for the success of DEIS and the National Strategy. These include: integrated policymaking, further

autonomy for schools and teachers, reform of continued professional development and teacher training, engagement with families and the local community, meaningful collaboration with key stakeholders, a wider culture of reading and support for schooling, and a history of policy that tackles disadvantage.

However, PISA reading scores have been higher than the UK nations since 2006, excluding the previously explained 2009 dip. This sustained difference between the Republic of Ireland and the UK nations may point to the importance of policies that have existed for longer periods of time, and/or to other factors, such as cultural differences, playing a role.

Have the factors associated with good reading attainment in PISA changed since 2009?

In general, the factors associated with higher reading achievement were similar for the Republic of Ireland and the UK nations, and were unchanged since 2006. There were, however, some factors which relate to higher reading attainment that that were different for pupils in the Republic of Ireland compared with UK pupils. They reported greater enjoyment of reading, higher aspirations for the future (though this was similar to pupils in England) and having more cultural possessions in their home, such as classic literature, works of art or musical instruments.

Are there lessons that can be applied more widely?

The report highlights several key findings that could be used to support future policy development:

- an approach to policy that values continuity and an approach to policy development that integrates existing policies into new initiatives
- policies that build a collaborative culture between schools, families and local communities
- building review, evaluation and measures of success into the policy creation process
- a continued focus on identifying and supporting pupils at the lower end of the attainment distribution
- further work to explore the key elements of teacher training and CPD reform in the Republic of Ireland.