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ABSTRACT

The island of Ireland has been divided for the past century by an international border, now a border between the EU and the UK. While Northern Ireland, part of the UK, and the Republic of Ireland have similar challenges

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and opportunities in their education systems, and there is evidence that each jurisdiction has learned from the other, the systems have evolved differently and have diverged significantly, and those differences, and the impact and effectiveness of school-level education in both parts of the island, form the focus of this paper. With post-Brexit pressures on the political union within the UK and increased fervour in discussions around trading border locations and constitutional positions, it is timely to examine the challenges, and opportunities, should the two systems converge once again.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The island of Ireland has been divided for the past century by an international border, now a border between the EU and the UK. While Northern Ireland, part of the UK, and the Republic of Ireland (henceforth 'Ireland') have similar challenges and opportunities in their education systems, with evidence that each jurisdiction has learned from the other, the systems that form the basis for this paper have evolved differently during the past century.

One contrast between the two systems relates to the social divisions within Northern Ireland along ethno-religious grounds: Ireland tends to be much more homogeneous. Divisions in Northern Ireland have existed since before partition and are replicated in how schools are organised.[1] Ethno-religious tension between the Protestant and Catholic communities erupted into a 30-year conflict from 1968, only ceasing with the signing of the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement in 1998.

The differences that emerged as the two systems evolved separately may reflect differing needs in each jurisdiction, and the perceptions of what education systems can contribute to the development of society. Discussion concerning Irish unity has been brought back to the fore by the UK's decision to leave the EU in 2016—Brexit—which a majority of the voters of Northern Ireland rejected.[2] It is unclear whether reunification will occur and, if it does, in what timeframe, but nonetheless a closer

[1] M. Brown, C. Donnelly, P. Shevlin, C. Skerritt, G. McNamara and J. O'Hara, 'The rise and fall and rise of academic selection: the case of Northern Ireland', *Irish Studies in International Affairs* 32 (2) (2021), 477–98.

[2] C. Gormley-Heenan and A. Aughey, 'Northern Ireland and Brexit: three effects on "the border in the mind"', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 19 (3) 2017), 497–511; N. McEwen and M.C. Murphy, 'Brexit and the union: territorial voice, exit and re-entry strategies in Scotland and Northern Ireland after EU exit', *International Political Science Review* 43 (3) (2022), 374–89.

alignment seems inevitable,[3] as anticipated by the Shared Island initiative.[4] In any version of an all-island approach, it would be important to know how different or how closely aligned the two educational systems are, where the overlaps lie in terms of needs, processes and structures and how easy it would be to harmonise the two systems. Education, alongside health, has been recognised in the Irish government's Shared Island initiative as a sector in which there is potential for more cooperation across the two jurisdictions,[5] although there may be many challenges in developing closer policy alignment.

Before the partition of the island in 1921 and the formation of Northern Ireland and what would become the Republic of Ireland, there was a common system of universal, free primary education across the island. The first attempt to develop a national education system was in 1811 through the Kildare Place Society (officially known as the Society for the Promotion of the Education of the Poor of Ireland) and, emanating as it did from the established Church of Ireland, it met some suspicion.[6] It claimed to be non-denominational and aimed to deliver a bible-based education acceptable to Catholics, with 'exclusion of religious education from its schools, other than the compulsory reading of the scriptures "without note or comment"'.[7] It ultimately failed as it was viewed by many as undermining the Catholic faith.[8] The subsequent roll-out of a National School system in 1831 was designed to provide, as Chief Secretary Edward Stanley wrote at the time, 'a system of education from which should be banished even the suspicion of proselytism, and which, admitting children of all religious persuasions, should not interfere with the peculiar tenets of any'.[9] Despite those claims, there was considerable opposition. Catholic Emancipation, with the end of the Penal Laws against Catholics in Ireland, was fully enacted only in 1829, so, unsurprisingly, some viewed

[3] N. Richmond, 'Towards a new Ireland', *Political Quarterly* 94 (1) (2023), 115–21.

[4] National Economic and Social Council, *Shared Island shared opportunity: NESC comprehensive report* (2022), available at: http://www.tara.tcd.ie/handle/2262/100569 (18 May 2023).

[5] Irish Government News Service, Online address by An Taoiseach on Shared Island (2020), available at: https://merrionstreet.ie/en/news-room/speeches/online_address_by_an_taoiseach_on_shared_island.html (18 May 2023).

[6] M. Brown, G. McNamara, J. O'Hara and S. O'Brien, 'Exploring the changing face of school inspections', *Eurasian Journal of Educational Research* 16 (66) (2016), 1–26.

[7] H. Hislop, 'The management of the Kildare Place School system 1811–1831', *Irish Educational Studies* 11 (1) (1992), 52–71: 52.

[8] Hislop, 'Management of the Kildare Place School system', 59.

[9] T. Ó Raifeartaigh, 'Mixed education and the synod of Ulster, 1831–40', *Irish Historical Studies* 9 (35) (1955), 281–99: 281–2.

the establishment of National Schools as part of a wider government conspiracy to undermine Catholicism. In fact, the Catholic archbishop of Tuam went so far as to state that 'from the extraordinary power now claimed by the state over a mixed education, it would soon claim a similar despotic control over mixed marriages and strive to stretch its net over all ecclesiastical concerns'.[10] There was little more support initially from the Church of Ireland and, in Ulster, the Presbyterian synod viewed it as such a threat that they harried teachers. Some National Schools were even burned.[11] Nonetheless, by partition, the National Schools had been accepted by the churches; this may have been a consequence of most having become denominational in character and governance.[12] There was a national system of education but, in most instances, it was divided by community affiliation.

In 1921, most young people's education ceased at twelve or thirteen. In the case of Northern Ireland, Grammar schools provided an academic education to older learners whose families could afford it, but, as most had been established by religious orders or churches, these too were divided by community background. This was also the case in Ireland, where the vast majority of both primary and secondary schools were under the control of churches, largely the Catholic Church.

Since partition, the two education systems, in Northern Ireland and in Ireland, have diverged significantly. However, there are commonalties between them: those commonalities and differences, and their effects on school-level education in both Northern Ireland and Ireland, form the focus of this paper. With post-Brexit pressures on the political union within the UK and increased fervour in discussions around trading border locations and constitutional positions, it is timely to examine the challenges and opportunities for both education systems should they converge once again.

The paper begins with an overview of the evolution of education in both jurisdictions, followed by an analysis of the commonalities and differences as they relate to the scale and cost of education, large-scale assessments

[10] D.H. Akenson, *The Irish education experiment: the national system of education in the nineteenth century* (London, 1970).
[11] M. Milliken, 'The governance of schools', Transforming Education Briefing Paper (2020), 1, available at: https://www.ulster.ac.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0006/640563/TEUU-Report-05-Governance-of-Schools.pdf (18 May 2023).
[12] S. Farren, 'A divided and divisive legacy: education in Ireland 1900–20', *History of Education* 23 (2) (1994), 207–24.

of achievement, how schools are evaluated and the mechanisms that have been put in place to target disadvantage and curriculum and assessment. Lessons to be learned from both jurisdictions are considered, and the paper concludes with a discussion on the challenges and opportunities for both jurisdictions should further alignment occur.

EVOLUTION OF EDUCATION IN NORTHERN IRELAND

Following partition, initial efforts were made to create an integrated education system in Northern Ireland akin to Stanley's vision of a century before. While the education system inherited by the Northern Ireland government was almost completely denominationally separated, the first education minister in the fledgling Northern Ireland, Lord Londonderry, attempted to create a common education system acceptable to all denominations. Churches from both traditions in Northern Ireland were unhappy with the legislation, troubled by what they perceived as a slide towards secularism and the loss of their schools. The Catholic Church was concerned not to cede control of the education of its parishioners to 'a Protestant Parliament and a Protestant State', as Northern Ireland's first prime minister later characterised it.[13]

Over subsequent decades, the Church of Ireland and Presbyterian and Methodist Churches transferred control of almost all of their schools, and school buildings, learners and staff, to the Northern Ireland state. The churches were compensated by guaranteed representation on the boards of governors of the state-controlled schools, and they were allowed to continue to use faith as a consideration in the appointment of teachers. The 'transferors' were also given statutory representation on the administration of education through county boards. This continued through each of the administrative developments that have taken place since, providing Protestant churches with considerable influence over Controlled, effectively 'state', schooling.[14]

Catholic parishes did not cede control of their schools and, consequently, got limited funding for their schools, apart from the payment of teachers' salaries. There was initially no public funding for maintenance or building costs for Catholic schools, compared to the 100% funding given to Controlled

[13] J. Craig, *The Stormont Papers*, vol. 35 (1934), 73.
[14] Akenson, *The Irish education experiment.*

schools: a situation much resented by that section of the population.[15] By 1945, grants for building and maintenance of 65% began to be provided. Only in the 1960s, when Catholic schools agreed to public representation in their school management, were these increased to 80%, eventually reaching 100% in 1992.[16]

Thus, denominational education became institutionalised, with learners attending either Maintained schools, owned and managed by the Catholic church or state, or de facto Protestant, Controlled schools.

Free post-primary education was introduced in Northern Ireland in 1947, mirroring to a large degree the system created by the 1944 Education Act in England and Wales. The new system divided learners into two types of schools based on academic assessment at the age of eleven: Grammar schools for the highest achieving 30% of learners and secondary schools for the remainder. School attendance was compulsory until fifteen years of age, later raised to sixteen. Since 1947, educational developments in Northern Ireland have closely reflected changes implemented in England and Wales. There is one notable exception: the widespread replacement of academic selection with comprehensive education in England and Wales after 1965 was not adopted.[17] While state-run academic selection is no longer sanctioned, Northern Ireland largely retains academic selection through tests administered privately by Grammar schools. This separates children at the age of eleven, except for a small cluster of schools that select at age fourteen, into either an academic route through Grammar schools or a supposedly less academic route through non-Grammar schools, often called secondary schools. Voluntary Grammar schools can be divided into those that have a Catholic ethos and those that do not; the latter can be characterised as having a Protestant ethos.

A range of reports have recommended that academic selection should end as soon as possible.[18] The Sinn Féin education minister, Caitriona Ruane, discontinued the state-provided academic transfer process in 2008. However,

[15] S.N. Farren, 'Catholic-nationalist attitudes to education in Northern Ireland, 1921–1947', *Irish Educational Studies* 8 (1) (1989), 56–73.

[16] T. Gallagher, 'The story of Catholic schools in Northern Ireland: past, present and possible future', in T. Burgess (ed.), *The contested identities of Ulster Catholics* (Cham, 2018).

[17] S. McWilliams, P. Cannon, M. Farrar, B. Tubbert, C. Connolly and F. McSorley, 'Comparison and evaluation of aspects of teacher education in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland', *European Journal of Teacher Education* 29 (1) (2006), 67–79: 69.

[18] G. Burns, *Education for the twenty-first century* (2001), available at: https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/report-review-body-post-primary-education-burns-report (18 May 2023); S. Costello, *Future post-primary arrangements in Northern Ireland: Advice from the Post-Primary Review Working Group* (2004), available at: https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/costello-report-full (18 May 2023).

such was the political division at the time, this was replaced by admission tests set by both of the main sectors, and two sets of tests emerged. As Norton puts it, young people reportedly talk of 'sitting the Protestant test or the Catholic test'.[19] A single test was eventually agreed, to begin in November 2023.

Most schools in Northern Ireland are divided by community affiliation, including preschools.[20] Maintained schools are mostly attended, staffed and governed by members of the Catholic community, while Controlled schools largely draw their enrolment and employ teachers from the Protestant community.[21]

It is clear that 'the role of the Churches remains strong in school-level education, as does the level of religious separation'.[22] There is also a requirement that every grant-aided school must provide a daily act of collective worship and provide Religious Education following a specified Christian core syllabus.[23] There are, however, smaller sectors that are neither owned nor governed by the churches, including Irish-medium schools and Integrated schools (Table 1).

Finally. almost all children in Northern Ireland attend a free year of preschool education at the age of three, moving to primary schools from four years of age. After seven years of primary school, learners transfer to post-primary schools, where they take formal GCSE examinations at approximately sixteen years of age, usually in eight subjects, and can legally leave school. A proportion remain for a further two years and complete higher-stakes A-level examinations. These are more specialist courses, with learners generally studying three or four subjects.

EVOLUTION OF EDUCATION IN IRELAND

After partition, the system of National Schools established in the previous century continued to provide free primary-level education and remained

[19] C. Norton, 'Grammar schools – Do they work? A Northern Irish perspective', Young Fabians blog (7 March 2017), available at: http://www.youngfabians.org.uk/grammar_school_northern_ireland (18 May 2023).

[20] S. Roulston and S. Cook, 'Pre-school education in Northern Ireland', Transforming Education Briefing Paper (2020), available at: https://www.ulster.ac.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0003/751800/TEUU-Report-06-Pre-School.pdf (18 May 2023).

[21] M. Milliken, J. Bates and A. Smith, 'Education policies and teacher deployment in Northern Ireland: ethnic separation, cultural encapsulation and community cross-over', *British Journal of Educational Studies* 68 (2) (2019), 139–60.

[22] T. Gallagher, *Education, equality and the economy*. Queen' s University Belfast (2019), 3, available at: https://www.qub.ac.uk/home/Filestore/Filetoupload,925382,en.pdf (18 May 2023).

[23] M. Milliken, 'Employment mobility of teachers and the FETO exception', Transforming Education Briefing Paper (2019), available at: https://www.ulster.ac.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0003/409458/TEUU-Report-01-Feto.pdf (24 May 2023).

Table 1. Schools in Northern Ireland (2020/21)

	Enrolment % Catholic	Enrolment % Protestant	Enrolment % other††	Proportion of learners in school sector (%)
Primary schools (4–11 years)				
Controlled	8.0	59.6	32.4	46
Catholic Maintained	94.2	0.9	5.0	46
Grant Maintained Integrated	39.9	29.0	31.1	3
Controlled Integrated	27.5	34.5	38.0	3
Other Maintained (mostly Irish-medium schools)	84.3	6.9	8.8	2
Post-primary schools (11–16/18)				
Non-Grammar				
Controlled	4.3	75.0	20.7	25
Catholic Maintained	93.6	*	*	30
Controlled Integrated**	16.8	52.9	30.3	3
Grant Maintained Integrated**	40.9	36.4	22.7	8
Other Maintained (Irish-medium)	94.4	†	*	1
Grammar				
Controlled	10.9	66.3	22.9	8
Voluntary, schools under Catholic management	95.0	1.4	3.6	15
Voluntary, schools under other management	14.5	58.4	27.0	11

Source: 2020/21 data adapted from Department of Education, Northern Ireland census returns.
* Number suppressed. † Fewer than five cases. ** These schools have a comprehensive intake, but some have a Grammar stream. ‡ The relatively large and growing proportion of 'other', especially in Controlled schools, may relate to the wider shift away from a simple binary of Protestant/Catholic (K. Hayward, 'The 2019 general election in Northern Ireland: the rise of the centre ground?', *Political Quarterly* 91 (1) (2020), 49–55) or to how schools complete their census returns (S. Roulston and S. Cook, 'Using GIS to analyse early years provision in Northern Ireland – adding another year of segregated education?', *Oxford Review of Education* (2023), https://doi.org/10.1080/03054985.2023.2190088).

largely unchanged. Mostly, these schools were denominational, generally Catholic, but with a small number of minority faith schools, largely Protestant, and a very small number of multi-denominational schools.[24] Free post-primary education was not introduced until 1967, after the seminal *Investment in Education* report[25] criticised the low level of retention beyond primary school, and flagged the potential economic benefits that increased

[24] M. Darmody and E. Smyth, 'Religion and primary school choice in Ireland: school institutional identities and student profile', *Irish Educational Studies* 37 (1) (2018), 2.
[25] Department of Education, *Investment in Education: Report of the Survey Team Appointed by the Minister for Education in October, 1962 (and) Annexes and Appendices* (Dublin, 1965).

retention might bring.[26] Although all existing schools were offered financial incentives to provide free education, 66 opted to remain fee-paying and private. Currently, 50 private education providers cater for 26,000 learners.[27]

The school leaving age increased from fourteen to fifteen in 1972 and sixteen in 2000, with a year of free preschool introduced in 2010, which was subsequently extended to two years. Prior to this, many children were enrolled in primary school when they turned four. However, unlike in Northern Ireland, parents can opt to enrol their child in primary school at any stage between the ages of four and six. A consequence of the availability of preschool has been a later primary starting age, with many parents waiting until their child is closer to age six, at which point compulsory schooling begins.[28]

All of these changes have greatly increased participation rates in secondary education, to which, after eight years in primary school, learners transfer at the age of twelve or thirteen. They complete the Junior Cycle for three years, sitting the formal Junior Certificate. While learners can legally leave school at sixteen or after three years of secondary education, whichever is later, most continue into the Senior Cycle, lasting two years. The Senior Cycle ends with a series of examinations, the Leaving Certificate, in which candidates take a minimum of six subjects and, as with A-levels in Northern Ireland, the learners who perform highest in these examinations have greater choice as to what courses to choose at the higher education level.[29]

Historical public–private partnerships (mainly with the Catholic Church) also mean that Ireland's schools are publicly funded but remain, to a significant extent, run by private providers. Church control is particularly strong at the primary level;[30] approximately 89% of those are classified as Catholic, and fewer than 5% are classified as inter- or multi-denominational.[31]

[26] C. O'Brien, 'Fifty years after free secondary education, what big idea do we need in 2017?', *Irish Times*, 14 February 2017.

[27] Department of Education, 'Post-primary schools enrolment figures' (2022), available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/post-primary-schools/ (18 May 2023).

[28] E. Eivers and E. Chubb, *Shaping Schools: What TIMSS tells us about education systems*, ERC Research Series (1) (Educational Research Centre, Dublin, 2017).

[29] M. Brown, D. Burns, G. McNamara and J. O'Hara, 'Culturally responsive classroom-based assessment: a case study of secondary schools in Ireland', *Revista de Investigación Educativa* 40 (1) (2022), 15–32.

[30] A. Hyland, 'Multi-denominational schools in the Republic of Ireland', paper delivered at Conference on Education and Religion, University of Nice, 21–22 June 1996; M. Lewis and P. Archer, 'Features of policy and provision', in E. Eivers and A. Clerkin (eds), *National Schools, international contexts: beyond the PIRLS and TIMSS test results* (Dublin, 2013).

[31] Department of Education, *Primary schools 2021/2022* (2022), available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/primary-schools/#20212022 (18 May 2023).

Denominational patronage of primary schools has also been described as 'a key legacy of British colonial and Irish sectarian bargaining',[32] and the newly established Irish state in 1921 was accused of effectively subcontracting responsibility for education to the churches,[33] with state funding given to provide free education on its behalf. As can be seen in Table 2, this model of privately owned but state-funded education dominated by churches still exists in Ireland today,[34] although 'the typical Irish school is neither strictly public, nor strictly private, but a hybrid'.[35]

At the secondary level, more than 50% of schools are voluntary secondary schools, most of which are denominational (Catholic) schools (Table 2). There is also the comprehensive/community school sector in Ireland, regarded by some as a reflection of a reformation in the 1960s sweeping through Ireland's institutions[36] and responding to a shift towards comprehensive education in Britain and across Europe.[37] However, research by Clarke[38] into correspondence and discussions between the minister of education at the time and the Catholic bishops highlights the crucial influence that the Catholic Church exercised in the formation of comprehensive schools. There is evidence that this reduced the potential for their growth, thus protecting the denominational voluntary schools in which the church has such a stake. According to Clarke, this effectively 'placed these new schools under denominational influence'.[39]

Indeed, church influence seems to be felt throughout the education system in Ireland, as 'almost the entire responsibility for the provision of education in the Irish state lies within the remit of the Catholic Church'.[40] This is despite recommendations to provide alternatives to denominational schools, such as in 2019.[41] While the multi-denominational sector is growing steadily, it remains

[32] K. Kitching, 'A thousand tiny pluralities: children becoming-other than the requirements of post-secular neoliberal policy recognition', *Critical Studies in Education* 61 (2) (2020), 133–48.
[33] J. Coolahan, *Irish education—history and structure* (Dublin, 1981).
[34] C. O'Mahony, 'Religious education in Ireland', in D.H. Davies and E. Miroshnikova (eds), *The Routledge international handbook of religious education* (New York, 2013), 156–66.
[35] N. Rougier and I. Honohan, 'Religion and education in Ireland: growing diversity – or losing faith in the system?', *Comparative Education* 51 (1) (2015), 71–86.
[36] J.J. Lee, *Ireland 1912–1985: politics and society* (Cambridge, 1989).
[37] Coolahan, *Irish education.*
[38] M. Clarke, 'Educational reform in the 1960s: the introduction of comprehensive schools in the Republic of Ireland', *History of Education* 39 (3) (2010), 383–99.
[39] Clarke, 'Educational reform in the 1960s', 398.
[40] G. Sullivan, '"I think it's very difficult to be different": how does religious education contribute to inclusion in an Irish Roman Catholic post-primary school?' (doctoral dissertation, Dublin City University, 2019), 24.
[41] Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission, *Ireland and the Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination* (2019), 65, available at: https://www.ihrec.ie/app/uploads/2022/08/IHREC_CERD_UN_Submission_Oct_19.pdf (24 May 2023).

Table 2. Schools in the Republic of Ireland (2021/2022)

	Description	% of sector
Primary schools (4–12 years)		
Primary-level education institutions aided by the Department of Education		
Ordinary National Schools	Funded directly by the state but managed by a patron body, and local representatives	73
Ordinary National Schools with learners with special needs	Provide education for learners with particular types of disability and special needs.	23
Special schools		4
Post-primary (second-level) schools (12–18/19 years)		
Second-level education institutions aided by the Department of Education		
Secondary schools	Privately owned and managed under the trusteeship of religious communities, boards of governors or individuals	53
Vocational (Education and Training Board) schools	Owned and managed by the local Education and Training Board	34
Community schools	Funded by central government. Often formed by the amalgamation of Vocational and Voluntary schools	11
Comprehensive schools		2

Source: Adapted from https://data.cso.ie/

relatively small.[42] Even in the apparently more diverse secondary school sector, 47% of schools are under the direct patronage of the Catholic Church and many of the others, while nominally non-Catholic, have a strong Catholic influence in their governance and operation.[43] For example, publicly managed Education and Training Board (ETB) schools, previously known as vocational schools, make up approximately one-third of the secondary education sector. Although originally established by the state to be administered by what became the ETBs, with no link with the churches, many ETBs now have religious representatives on their boards of management,[44] and, as a result, these schools are often described as inter-denominational rather than non-denominational.[45]

Ireland's combination of voluntary secondary schools and ETB schools, with a small number of community and comprehensive schools occupying the middle ground, has some parallels to Northern Ireland's division between Grammar and secondary schools but crucially, unlike Northern Ireland, Ireland

[42] Department of Education, *Statistical Bulletin: Enrolments September 2020*, 3, available at: https://assets.gov.ie/129338/6f97f952–0551–45de-8789-c64fdf34b85f.pdf (18 May 2023).
[43] Rougier and Honohan, *Religion and education in Ireland.*
[44] S. Drudy and K. Lynch, *Schools and society in Ireland* (Dublin, 1993).
[45] K. Fischer, 'Adapting the school system to the globalisation of Ireland's population—an Irish solution to an Irish problem?', *Irish Review* 40 (41) (2009), 141–154: 144.

did not outwardly embrace academic selection. However, many schools did run entrance tests and some schools, particularly in the 1980s, used externally devised entrance examinations to stream learners. In other words, and in many respects in an internal variant of Northern Ireland's academic selection, learners who performed highest would be put into what was commonly referred to at the time as an A or B class. In contrast, at the other end, learners who performed poorly in these entrance tests would be streamed into, for example, an E or F class that was primarily geared towards preparing them for the service and construction industries, with limited opportunity to attain the required results to enter higher education. For example, a learner in an E or F class would almost always be prepared for an ordinary-level state examination in English, Irish and mathematics, although many higher education courses required learners to have at least passed the higher-level state examination. As such, this system of academic streaming tended to replicate divisions based on socio-economic status (SES) just as academic selection and the division into vocational and academic pathways appear to in Northern Ireland and, to this day, while intergenerational privilege at the secondary and higher education levels has waned, private fee-paying schools, especially in the Dublin area, continue to exacerbate this issue. Indeed, according to Courtois, almost 7% of the school-going population in Ireland attend 'fee paying' schools that also have the option of giving preference to a proportion of learners whose parents or siblings attended the school.[46]

Nonetheless, the post-primary school sector in Ireland is said to cater for learners from a range of backgrounds and representing all abilities, whether academic or vocational, in the same building. In some towns, this has been strengthened by the amalgamation of schools with a different ethos, together with the limited development of comprehensive/community schools. Even the incidence of streaming in Ireland's schools is much reduced, as its impact on outcomes was found to be of limited value.[47] However, policies for dealing with over-subscription in Ireland's schools can replicate social division and, according to Ledwith, for example, 'such selection criteria work against families without long-term intergenerational ties to a locality',[48] to the detriment

[46] A. Courtois, 'How can we identify elite schools (where they do not exist)? The case of Ireland', in F. Denord, M. Palme and B. Réau (eds), *Researching elites and power: theory, methods, analyses* (Cham, 2020), 169–79.
[47] E. Smyth, 'Educational inequalities: the role of schools', in N. McElvany, H.G. Holtappels, F. Lauermann, et al. (eds), 'Against the odds—(in)equity in education and educational systems', *Dortmunder Symposium der Empirischen Bildungsforschung* 5 (2020), 107.
[48] V. Ledwith, 'State supported segregation? Examining migrant clustering in schools in Ireland', *Space and Polity* 21(3) (2017), 335–54: 340.

of, for example, migrant families.[49] Since Ledwith's paper, the 2018 Admissions Act has been passed, which has addressed policies that discriminated against new arrivals in an area. However, while it precludes Catholic primary schools from using religion as a criterion for admission, minority religious schools such as Protestant schools can still apply this.[50]

AREAS OF COMMONALITY

Across OECD countries, about 84% of second-level learners attend publicly owned government schools. Along with the Netherlands and Chile, the UK and Ireland are the only OECD countries where more than half of learners attend government-dependent private schools (privately managed schools that receive more than half of their funding from government sources).[51] Both jurisdictions also have an unusually large proportion of schools that would be described as 'small' by international standards. This means that multigrade classrooms are a more common feature of primary level provision than internationally.[52] In Northern Ireland, the independent Bain Review argued that falling learner numbers and multiple sectors and types of schools meant that there were far too many schools for too few learners.[53] The Sustainable Schools Policy[54] was introduced to address some of the Bain Review's recommendations and has contributed to a significant number of school closures (the number of schools fell from about 1,300 pre-Bain to just under 1,000 at the end of 2021/22). Nonetheless, roughly 30% of schools currently do not meet one of the definitions of a sustainable school, one of which is enrolment numbers (at least 105 learners in a rural primary school, 140 in a Belfast or Derry primary, and at least 500

[49] M. Brown, G. McNamara, J. O'Hara, S. Hood, D. Burns and G. Kurum, 'Evaluating the impact of distributed culturally responsive leadership in a disadvantaged rural primary school in Ireland', *Educational Management Administration and Leadership* 47 (3) (2019), 457–74.

[50] M. Griffin, 'Catholic schools in Ireland today – a changing sector in a time of change', *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* 108 (429) (2019), 55–63.

[51] OECD, *PISA 2015 Results (Volume II): Policies and practices for successful schools* (Paris, 2016). In almost all cases these schools are not what would normally be considered a 'private school', as that term tends to be restricted to fee-charging schools. However, the vast majority of government-dependent private schools on the island of Ireland do not charge fees.

[52] Eivers and Chubb, *Shaping Schools*; M. Fargas-Malet and C. Bagley, 'Serving divided communities: consociationalism and the experiences of principals of small rural primary schools in Northern Ireland', *British Journal of Educational Studies* (2022), available at: https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00071005.2022.2110857 (18 May 2023).

[53] Department of Education Northern Ireland, *Schools for the future: funding, strategy, sharing: report of the Independent Strategic Review of Education* (2006), available at: https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/id/eprint/9777/ (18 May 2023).

[54] Department of Education Northern Ireland, *Sustainable Schools Policy* (2009), available at: https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/articles/sustainable-schools (18 May 2023).

learners at post-primary level, rising to 1,000 if sixth form is included). In Northern Ireland, the issue of small schools is complicated by the division and duplication in education. Research has evidenced 32 pairs of small schools in villages and hamlets, an average of 670 yards (613 metres) apart, serving different communities. In only six of the 32 pairs were both schools sustainable in terms of enrolment, and some of those were barely so. Such settlements might be able to support one school; it is unlikely that a two-school solution would be sustainable in the longer term.[55] Rationalising small, generally rural primary schools is also a policy in Ireland, but it seems not to be so fully implemented as in Northern Ireland. Ireland's Department of Education and Skills (2013) value-for-money review of small schools identified concerns about school enrolments but focused only on the primary level.[56] When the review began in 2011, there were 600 'small primary schools' (defined as those with an enrolment of fewer than 50 learners). As of the 2021/22 academic year, there are 581 such schools (almost 600 if those with an enrolment of 50 are included). As stated by the Department of Education:

> small schools … comprise a large proportion of primary schools in Ireland. 41.6 per cent of all schools in the 2020 academic year had four mainstream classes or fewer…[and] while the number of small schools has been declining in recent years they nonetheless remain very prominent, particularly in rural areas.[57]

Thus, consolidation or closure of small schools has been more limited than in Northern Ireland. Using an equivalent measure (fewer than 105 learners), over 1,300 primary schools in Ireland (about 40%) would fall under Northern Ireland's definition of an unsustainable school.

In both Northern Ireland and Ireland, the respective Departments of Education also engage in ongoing monitoring of educational provision and outcomes via school inspection. Indeed, one success of the Good Friday Agreement is that there appears to be regular collaboration between the two inspectorates, together with a memorandum of understanding that 'allows for the exchange of inspectors for

[55] S. Roulston and S. Cook, 'Isolated together: proximal pairs of primary schools duplicating provision in Northern Ireland', *British Journal of Educational Studies* 69 (2) (2021), 155–74.
[56] Department of Education and Skills, *Value for money review of small schools* (2013), available at: https://assets.gov.ie/31347/0bec734bca434bb0a5e5de612a072016.pdf (18 May 2023)
[57] Department of Education, *Statistical Bulletin July 2021: Overview of Education 2000–2020* (2021), 12, available at: https://www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/139883/8cc02789-a453–4abd-8940-b6195377909f.pdf#page=null (18 May 2023).

observation purposes'.[58] Both systems have well-developed inspection systems that use a variety of inspection types such as incidental, subject, proportionate and whole school inspections.[59] They also have considerable information to hand, such as enrolment and assessment data prior to entry to the school, and actively encourage schools to carry out their own internal self-evaluations in accordance with inspectorate-devised guidelines.[60] There are, however, differences between inspectorates on the island of Ireland,[61] in particular relating to the requirements of school self-evaluation and the quality assurance of teacher education. In the case of Ireland, all schools are required to have self-evaluation plans and reports for priority areas that address, for example, national wellbeing and curriculum goals.[62] However, in Northern Ireland the inspectorate strongly encourages but does not require school self-evaluation reports. Finally, while the remit of the inspectorate in Ireland is limited to the inspection of early years settings, primary and secondary schools, in the case of Northern Ireland, the Education and Training Inspectorate also inspects teacher education and further education programmes.

Although testing is required in both jurisdictions, schools in Ireland can choose which standardised tests they wish to administer. Thus, the outcomes are not relied on as a system-level monitoring tool to the same extent as Key Stage (KS) outcomes are. Instead, in Ireland, system monitoring is via periodic National Assessments of Mathematics and English Reading, which are low-stakes assessments at the school level. Learners in a representative sample of schools are assessed using secure tests. There is continuity in assessment content from one cycle to the next, permitting trend analyses, and results are reported to the Department at national level. However, unlike KS, no feedback is provided to the Department on the performance of any individual school. This is designed to avoid practices such as 'teaching for the test' and to therefore provide more realistic measures of standards with a substantial indicator of trends.

In both jurisdictions, the aim of assessment is to improve outcomes for both individuals and schools. The assessments vary in terms of level, type of assessment and audience. For example, diagnostic and formative assessment

[58] E. Smyth, A. Devlin, A. Bergin and S. McGuinness, *A North–South comparison of education and training systems: lessons for policy* (Dublin, 2022), 83.
[59] M. Brown, G. McNamara and J. O'Hara, 'Teacher accountability in education: the Irish experiment', in B. Walsh (ed.), *Essays in the History of Irish Education* (London, 2016), pp. 359–81.
[60] M. Brown, S. Gardezi, L. del Castillo Blanco, R. Simeonova, Y. Parvanova, G. McNamara, et al., 'School self-evaluation an international or country specific imperative for school improvement?', *International Journal of Educational Research Open* 2, 100063 (2021); M. Brown, G. McNamara, J. O'Hara and P. Shevlin, 'Polycentric inspection: a catalyst for sparking positive interactions in educational networks', *Evaluation* 26 (1) (2020), 76–97.
[61] M. Brown, 'Deconstructing evaluation in education' (PhD thesis, Dublin City University, 2013).
[62] Department of Education, *School self-evaluation: next steps. September 2022–June 2026* (Dublin, 2022).

of learners is undertaken, mainly at the beginning of the academic year, and summative at the end, with the main audience being the learner and their parents and teachers. School-level assessments are summative, allowing comparisons between schools and between year groups, and are accessible to school managing authorities and the inspectorate.

At the system level, summative and qualitative assessments are also made, which are of value to the respective education ministers and wider government. Additionally, both education systems take part in PISA, PIRLS and TIMSS,[63] and reports focusing on national outcomes are published on the respective departments' websites. However, in the case of Northern Ireland, it is only at GCSE level, with the proportion of A* to C grades currently used to assess the degree of success of schools and school systems, that extensive data on outcomes at school level become available.

On the other hand, in the case of Ireland and in accordance with the Education Act 1998, Leaving and Junior Certificate results are not made publicly available in order to avoid the production of league tables. An unintended consequence has been that newspapers annually publish a 'feeder schools list', ranking schools by the percentage of enrolment who transfer to a third-level course, and by transfer to 'elite' third-level institutions and courses. Unlike similar public lists in Northern Ireland, no contextual data (such as percentage of free school meal entitlement (FSME)) are provided. In the absence of such context, the 'value added' of affluent and fee-paying schools is typically assumed to be large, whereas longitudinal data show that it is negligible.[64]

KEY DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE EDUCATION SYSTEMS IN THE TWO JURISDICTIONS

Scale and cost of education

Northern Ireland and Ireland differ in population (1.9 million and 5.1 million respectively in 2021) and size, with a corresponding contrast in the number

[63] Programme for International Student Assessment; Progress in International Reading Literacy Study; Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study.

[64] A. Doris, D. O'Neill and O. Sweetman, 'Good schools or good students? The importance of selectivity for school rankings', *Oxford Review of Education* 48 (6) (2022), 804–26; M. O'Connell and G. Marks, 'Why are students attending fee-charging second-level schools in Ireland more likely to progress to high-demand university degree courses? Evidence from the Growing Up in Ireland longitudinal survey', *Irish Educational Studies* (2023), DOI:10.1080/03323315.2023.2174571.

of learners and schools (Table 3). Growth of learner numbers seems currently to be stronger in Ireland (reflecting stronger growth in the population as a whole), and the number of post-primary schools has increased significantly, while the number of primary schools has decreased only slightly. In Northern Ireland, the number of all schools has decreased, largely due to the closure of smaller primary schools deemed unsustainable. A fairly static or shrinking school population in Northern Ireland contrasts with rapid growth in Ireland. Both sets of circumstances pose challenges for education authorities, albeit different ones.

The investment in education by the state shows some contrasts, although it can be challenging to get figures that exactly correspond. Ireland spends proportionally more per learner at second than at primary level. The average expenditure on a second-level learner in Ireland (and on average in the EU and OECD) is about 1.2 times that allocated to a primary-level learner, and successive editions of the OECD's *Education at a Glance* show that gap remaining relatively stable for many years (Table 4).

In contrast, the relative allocations in the UK have fluctuated over the past decade, and primary level has often had higher average expenditure than second level. However, irrespective of the direction of the difference, it tends to be small (usually a factor of 1.05–1.1). Recent data specific to Northern Ireland are difficult to source, but the *Review of the Common Funding Scheme* noted that, relative to the UK as a whole, funds in Northern Ireland were

Table 3. Trends in school learner numbers (2020–21)

	Northern Ireland		Republic of Ireland	
	Number	**Trend**	**Number**	**Trend**
Primary schools	796	Falling	3240	Falling slightly
Primary school learners	183,710	Falling	545,463	Rising
Average learners per primary school	231		168	
Post-primary schools	192	Falling slightly	730	Rising
Post-primary learners	145,085	Fluctuating but rising slightly	379,160	Rising
Average learners per post-primary school	756		519	

Source: data.gov.ie and https://www.ninis2.nisra.gov.uk/public/Theme.aspx?themeNumber=130andthemeName=Children%20Education%20and%20Skills

Table 4. Per-learner spending (US$) compared to OECD and EU averages

	Primary	Lower secondary	Upper secondary	All secondary
Ireland	8,539	11,097	10,183	10,634
United Kingdom	11,679	12,199	13,247	12,765
OECD average	9,550	11,091	11,590	11,192
EU22 average	9,601	11,477	11,543	11,404

Source: OECD, *Education at a glance 2021: OECD indicators* (Paris, 2021), https://doi.org/10.1787/b35a14e5-en; Eurostat, *Educational expenditure* (Luxembourg, 2020), https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/images/0/03/Educational_expenditure_ET2020_II.xlsx

disproportionately directed towards second level.[65] At that time, expenditure on second-level learners was 1.4 times that for primary learners; the review proposed a more balanced distribution.

As well as relative allocations of funds to different levels, the overall percentage of GDP allocated to education highlights the fact that Ireland 'spends well below the norm for advanced high-income economies when it comes to education [and, to reach the average] … public spending on education would have to increase by close to £1.7 billion per annum'.[66] This underspend is significant at both primary and secondary levels. In 2020, Ireland spent only 1.3% of its GDP on pre-primary and primary education, compared to 4.4% in Sweden and an average of 1.7% in the EU27 countries. Ireland spent 1.2% of GDP on secondary education, with just three countries spending less. Eleven other countries spent 2.0% or more of their GDP on secondary education, and the average across the EU was 1.9%.[67]

Eurostat data are not available for the UK, but the most recent comparable World Bank data indicate that the UK allocated 5.2% of GDP to education overall, markedly higher than Ireland's 3.4%.[68] While across the UK expenditure per learner seems higher than that in Ireland, at least in primary and lower secondary, in Northern Ireland the spending per learner appears to be slightly lower overall (Table 5). In 2019 it was reported that Northern

[65] R. Salisbury, E. Bates and E. Eivers, *An independent review of the Common Funding Scheme* (2013), available at: https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/independent-review-common-funding-scheme-1 (18 May 2023).
[66] T.A. McDonnell and P. Goldrick-Kelly, *Public spending in the Republic of Ireland: a descriptive overview and growth implications* (Dublin, 2017), 20.
[67] Eurostat, *Government expenditure on education* (2021), available at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Government_expenditure_on_education#Expenditure_on_.27education.27 (18 May 2023).
[68] World Bank, *Government expenditure on education, total (% of GDP)* (2022), available at: https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.XPD.TOTL.GD.ZS?most_recent_value_desc=trueandyear_high_desc=true/ (18 May 2023).

Table 5. Per-learner spending (£)

	Ireland (2015)	UK (2017)
Primary and lower secondary	6,249	7,685
Upper secondary and post-secondary non-tertiary	8,513	7,570

Source: Eurostat, 2020. This shows national expenditure converted to an equivalent in US$, divided by the purchasing power parity (PPP) index. PPP equalises the purchasing power of different currencies. It provides a common metric that permits comparisons between countries on the relative spending at each level of the education system. For ease of comparison, all values are provided in pounds sterling, correct at the rate at the time of writing.

Ireland spent £5,500 on education per learner.[69] It is not clear what proportion of this is targeted at primary or post-primary learners, but overall, this was much less than any of the other countries of the UK, being lower than Scotland per learner by £1,100, for example. The spending per learner in Northern Ireland rose to £7,200 in 2022–23, but much of that was attributed to teacher back-pay funding and the impact of Covid-related spending. The 'signals of budget cuts for next year'[70] were quickly realised, with funding cut in real terms.[71]

In addition to the relatively small proportion of GDP spent on education, both Northern Ireland and Ireland appear to get less 'value' for their respective education budgets, because of the prevalence of small schools in each system. Put simply, it is generally held that it costs much more to educate a learner in a small school than in a large school,[72] although a contrary view suggests that 'small schools are more efficient or cost-effective'.[73] In Ireland, the *Value for Money Review* estimated an average cost for a primary school learner in a school with no more than 20 learners was €8,941, more than double the per head cost of schools with enrolments of 40 or more, with no marked differences in per-head costs after the number of class teachers exceeded four.[74] In Northern

[69] Institute of Fiscal Studies, *School spending* (2019), available at: https://election2019.ifs.org.uk/article/school-spending (18 May 2023).
[70] L. Sibieta, *How does school spending per pupil differ across the UK?* (2023), available at: https://ifs.org.uk/publications/how-does-school-spending-pupil-differ-across-uk (24 May 2023).
[71] BBC, 'Angry reaction to Stormont budget cuts', 27 April 2023, available at: https://www.bbc.com/news/live/uk-northern-ireland-politics-65397794 (24 May 2023).
[72] D.C. Gottfredson and S.M. DiPietro, 'School size, social capacity, and student victimization', *Sociology of Education* 84 (2011), 69–89.
[73] K. Leithwood and D. Jantzi, 'A review of empirical evidence about school size effects: a policy perspective', *Review of Educational Research*, 79 (1) (2009), 464–90: 484.
[74] Department of Education and Skills, *Value for money review of small schools*.

Ireland, Salisbury et al. also noted large variation in overall per-head cost, with a marked difference between schools with fewer than and more than 100 learners (broadly in line with the four-teacher divide in Ireland).[75] Education Authority data from 2022 show that, for teaching costs alone, a learner in a primary school with fewer than 60 learners incurred costs of £4,094, compared to £2,459 in very large schools,[76] although some of this may be due to the Small Schools Support Factor part of the Common Funding Formula, which was 3.83% of the overall budget to schools in Northern Ireland,[77] and cost over £44 million in 2018–19.[78]

Indeed, educational spending in Northern Ireland fell by 11% in the decade after 2009/10.[79] Schools in Northern Ireland are also increasingly running into problems with their allocated budgets and the numbers in deficit more than doubled to 396 in the five years before 2017/18, more than a third of all schools in Northern Ireland at that time, with one school over £7 million in the red. The auditor general said that 'The system is coming close to a tipping point.'[80]

While differences in data gathering methods make it difficult to be certain which jurisdiction spends more on education per learner, it is apparent that neither Ireland nor Northern Ireland is investing sufficiently or, arguably, efficiently enough in education.

Delivering for all learners

In the Education Order (Northern Ireland) debate in the House of Lords in 2006, the virtues of the education system in Northern Ireland were repeatedly voiced, largely by Northern Ireland peers. Lord Steinberg, who took great pride in his Northern Ireland Grammar school background, argued that 'for countless years the standard of education in Northern Ireland has been higher than that in Great Britain, and that continues to be the case'.[81] In some respects this is true, as A-level results in Northern Ireland are consistently higher than in the rest of the UK.[82] However, Lord Rogan, one of the few to

[75] Salisbury et al., *An independent review of the Common Funding Scheme.*
[76] S. McGonagle, 'Almost 300 schools in NI could face review due to concerns about pupil numbers', *Irish News* (18 January 2022).
[77] Education Authority, *Providing pathways: strategic area plan for school provision 2017–2020* (Belfast, 2017).
[78] Roulston and Cook, 'Isolated together'.
[79] Institute of Fiscal Studies, *School spending.*
[80] R. Meredith, 'School budgets reduced by about 10%, report finds', *BBC News* (16 October 2018).
[81] Hansard (2006) 'Education NI Order debate', available at: https://hansard.parliament.uk/Lords/2006-07-10/debates/06071026000001/Education(NorthernIreland)Order2006 (18 May 2023).
[82] M. Bain, 'Northern Ireland A-level students achieve best results in the UK with 99.1% pass rate', *Belfast Telegraph* (18 August 2022).

attempt balance on Northern Ireland's performance in GCSE and A-levels, stated that

> It is true that, at the top end of the achievement scale, more pupils leave school with good GCSEs and A-levels, but the overall performance figures for pupils on average are on a par with or slightly below those for England. Northern Ireland has one of the most unequal education systems in the world … Such a system cannot be regarded in total as excellent.[83]

The unequal education system in Northern Ireland is largely based on academic selection and social class, and 'the odds of a child securing a place at grammar school [are] five times less if they are entitled to free school meals compared to all other children'.[84] It has been argued that 'the division into grammar and non-grammar schools facilitates a form of social segregation',[85] and Devlin et al. note that academic selection limits intergenerational educational mobility.[86]

The quality of education in Ireland is generally deemed to be relatively high, and there is a 'positive regard in which education, teachers and school principals are held by wider society'.[87] However, just as in Northern Ireland, the Irish education system seems not to be fully successful in addressing persistent social inequalities. While gender inequalities have been reduced through education in Ireland, it was noted in 1999 that 'the effects of social class background on third-level participation do not appear to have changed substantially'.[88] This has continued, with 94% of learners from middle-class schools applying for higher education, compared to just half from working-class schools.[89] Research also points to the impact of a small number of elitist schools in Ireland which contribute to the reproduction of social

[83] Hansard, 'Education NI Order debate'.
[84] P. Connolly, D. Purvis and P.J. O'Grady, *Advancing shared education. Report of the Ministerial Advisory Group on Shared Education* (Belfast, 2013), 58.
[85] P. Nolan, *Northern Ireland Peace Monitoring Report No. 3* (Belfast, 2014), 93, available at: http://www.community-relations.org.uk/sites/crc/files/media-files/Peace-Monitoring-Report-2014.pdf (18 May 2023).
[86] A. Devlin, S. McGuinness, A. Bergin and E. Smyth, 'Education across the island of Ireland: examining educational outcomes, earnings and intergenerational mobility', *Irish Studies in International Affairs* 34 (2) (2023), 30–47.
[87] OECD, *Improving schools leadership: background report – Ireland* (March 2007), 61.
[88] E. Smyth, 'Educational inequalities among school leavers in Ireland 1979–1994', *Economic and Social Review* 30 (3) (1999), 267–84: 282.
[89] S. McCoy, E. Smyth, D. Watson and M. Darmody, *Leaving school in Ireland: a longitudinal study of post-school transitions*. ESRI Research Series (Dublin, 2014).

inequality.[90] Some researchers highlight 'a preservation of the status quo of class difference … that militates against social mobility'.[91]

While parallels exist, there is no selection by academic ability in Ireland as there is in Northern Ireland. However, social class divisions also persist in Ireland and have an impact on educational opportunities and outcomes for many.

While class divisions are apparent in both jurisdictions, Ireland seems to be having more success in retention rates and ensuring that a high proportion of the population is well qualified. Despite the minimum leaving age for learners being sixteen in Ireland, relatively few leave school at sixteen. Learner retention to the completion of Leaving Certificate has exceeded 90% for the past ten years, with girls more likely than boys to complete the Leaving Certificate (94% vs 90%).[92] On the other hand, while Northern Ireland has the same minimum leaving age of sixteen years, only 63% of sixteen- to seventeen-year-olds are studying for A levels or their equivalent. While the proportion taking A levels had risen from just 46% in 2003/04, that growth seems now to have stopped. The retention rate after compulsory education ends at sixteen years is lower for boys, as only 55% of boys remain at school to complete A levels or their equivalent; even for girls it is just 72%.[93]

In Ireland, there is also a striking percentage of learners taking one or more STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) subjects for the Leaving Certificate—90.2% of boys and 85.7% of girls in 2019[94]—although there are concerns about drop-out rates in third-level courses.[95] Developing STEM skills is a key initiative for Northern Ireland's Department of Education also and, in 2021, STEM subjects accounted for 42% of all Northern Ireland's GCSE entries.[96] However, if STEM is the key driver of employment that both

[90] A. Courtois, *Elite schooling and social inequality: privilege and power in Ireland's top private schools* (London, 2017).

[91] K. Cahill and K. Hall, 'Choosing schools: explorations in post-primary school choice in an urban Irish working class community', *Irish Educational Studies* 33 (4) (2014), 383–97: 395.

[92] Department of Education, *Retention rates of pupils in second-level schools – 2014 entry cohort* (2021), available at: https://assets.gov.ie/203522/017c3bc0–011c-468a-af67-f3e3091a1df4.pdf (18 May 2023).

[93] NISRA, *Qualifications and destinations of Northern Ireland school leavers: 2020–21* (2022), 11.

[94] Department of Education, *Education indicators for Ireland*, 16, available at: https://assets.gov.ie/117558/ef43dc12–56c3–4f5a-9e78-bafce7ef9764.pdf (18 May 2023).

[95] C. O'Brien, 'Drop-out rates in some third-level STEM courses hitting 80%', *Irish Times*, 19 March 2021.

[96] N. Campbell, 'STEM subjects accounted for 42% of all NI's GCSE entries', *SyncNI blog* (12 August 2021), available at: https://syncni.com/article/7258/stem-subjects-account-for-42-of-all-ni-s-gcse-entries (18 May 2023).

Departments of Education believe it to be, more needs to be done in Northern Ireland to increase the uptake of these subjects in schools and in higher education. In Ireland, 63% of all learners move into higher education,[97] while just 48% of young people in Northern Ireland do so.[98] There is a skills shortage in Northern Ireland; in 2020, just over 33% of the working population had a degree or higher qualification. On the other hand, at almost 43%, Ireland has the highest proportion of people across the EU aged 15–64 with a degree.[99]

At the other end of the scale are those with no qualifications: 'in 2017, 16.6% of Northern Ireland residents aged 16 to 64 had no qualifications, compared to 8.0% of all UK residents'.[100] While leaving school early is still something that education in Ireland is also having to address, particularly with groups such as the Traveller community,[101] it appears not to be such a pressing issue compared to Northern Ireland.[102] It has been noted that 'early school leaving is more than twice as prevalent in Northern Ireland as it is in Ireland (14.1% compared to 5.6%)'.[103] Reducing the numbers of early leavers from higher secondary education and training has been a key target of the EU for many years, and was one of five headline targets for the ten-year Europe 2020 strategy.[104]

Ireland's early leaving rates have been dropping, reaching 6.9% in 2015: better than the European average of 11%.[105] In Northern Ireland, the proportion of early leavers from education and training was 12.4% in 2013,[106] and a recent report suggested that 'the relatively low level of skills in the [Northern

[97] Department of Education, *Education indicators for Ireland* (2020), 24.
[98] NISRA, *School leavers*, available at: https://www.nisra.gov.uk/ (18 May 2023).
[99] Statista, *Share of those aged between 15 to 64 with tertiary educational attainment in selected European countries in 2020* (2021), available at: https://www.statista.com/statistics/1084737/eu-28-adults-with-tertiary-education-attainment/ (18 May 2023).
[100] NISRA, *Wellbeing measures*, available at: https://www.nisra.gov.uk/statistics/uk-national-wellbeing-measures-northern-ireland-data/education-and-skills (18 May 2023).
[101] Social Justice Ireland, *Early school leaving* (2020), available at: https://www.socialjustice.ie/content/policy-issues/impact-early-school-leaving (18 May 2023).
[102] NISRA, *Qualifications and destinations of Northern Ireland school leavers: 2020–21*, available at: https://www.nisra.gov.uk/ (18 May 2023).
[103] A. Devlin, S. McGuinness, A. Bergin and E. Smyth, 'Education across the island of Ireland: examining educational outcomes, earnings and intergenerational mobility', *Irish Studies in International Affairs* 34 (2) (2023), 30–47: 36.
[104] European Commission, *Progress towards the Lisbon objectives in education and training: indicators and benchmarks* (Luxembourg, 2009).
[105] L.H. Flynn, *Early school leaving: predictive risk factors* (2017), available at: https://www.tusla.ie/uploads/content/V3_Heeran_Flynn,_L._Early_School_Leaving_-_Predictive_Risk_Factors_July_2017_.pdf (18 May 2023).
[106] European Commission, *Tackling early leaving from education and training in Europe: strategies, policies and measures* (Luxembourg, 2014), 208.

Ireland] regional economy' would deter foreign direct investment, something which it notes has been addressed in Ireland.[107] Furthermore, it may not be unrelated that Northern Ireland is one of the UK regions with the lowest growth rates (measured as gross value-added growth) and the poorest productivity in these islands.[108]

Smyth et al. employ EU Labour Force Survey (LFS) data to show proportions of low educational achievement among 25–34 year-olds.[109] In Ireland, low educational achievement fell from just below 20% in 2005 to around 8% in 2019. Over the same period, the Northern Ireland figure for low educational achievement also dropped, from 24%, but less significantly, remaining stubbornly close to 20% over that period. Both Northern Ireland and Ireland are trying to address under-achievement in schools. For Northern Ireland, however, the tail of under-achievement seems to be longer and more concentrated in certain schools than in Ireland. Academic selection in Northern Ireland has resulted in 'a high concentration of less socially and economically advantaged learners in the non-selective post-primary schools'.[110] A selective system of education has been shown to reduce educational attainment overall, but it particularly impacts on learners from deprived areas.[111]

Another way to compare outcomes is to use data from the LFS. It tracks key EU strategy targets, including one related to the numbers of learners leaving school without adequate education and qualifications. Unlike data from the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) or the Department of Education (Northern Ireland), it includes those who have returned to education or obtained a qualification in an alternative education setting.

The EU Commission considers that completing upper secondary education (i.e. equivalent to Leaving Certificate or A levels) is the minimum desirable educational attainment level, and aims to reduce to below 9% the share of the EU population aged eighteen to 24 with, at most, lower secondary education, and who were not involved in further education or training. Those who fail to meet this standard are considered ELETs (early leavers from education and training). Tracking from 2012, Ireland's ELET rate was 10% whereas Northern

[107] D. Jordan and D. Turner, *Northern Ireland's productivity challenge: exploring the issues* (Manchester, 2021).
[108] Jordan and Turner, *Northern Ireland's productivity challenge*, 1.
[109] Smyth et al., *North–South comparison of education and training systems*, 11.
[110] C. Shewbridge, M. Hulshof, D. Nusche and L. Stenius Staehr, *OECD Reviews of Evaluation and Assessment in Education: Northern Ireland* (Paris, 2014), 21.
[111] J. Furlong and I. Lunt, (2020) 'Social mobility and higher education: are grammar schools the answer?', Occasional Paper 22, Higher Education Policy Institute, 9.

Ireland's was 14%. In the intervening years, Ireland's rate has slowly dropped, year on year, and in 2021 was only 3.3% (one of the lowest rates in the EU). In contrast, Northern Ireland's ELET rate rose in 2013 and 2014 before a gradual decline to 8.8% in 2019 (the last available data point). While higher than the rate (of 5.1%) at that time in Ireland, it was lower than the equivalent EU rate of 10.2%.

What international large-scale assessments say about achievement and equity

Learners in Northern Ireland and Ireland take different terminal examinations and educational pathways, making direct comparison difficult. However, international large-scale assessments of achievement (ILSAs) permit some comparison of learner outcomes. Much has been written elsewhere about national-level performance on ILSAs such as PISA and PIRLS. Suffice it to say that both Northern Ireland and Ireland perform reasonably well on international assessments. At primary level, both are well above international averages on reading, mathematics and science assessments.[112] At second level, Northern Ireland has shown a decline in science performance and was at the OECD average level in 2018, but has remained relatively stable and average at mathematics over many years, and has shown a marginal improvement to above OECD average levels on reading.[113] In Ireland, performance on reading tends to be well above average, with mathematics and science relatively stable and average (on PISA) to slightly above average (on TIMSS).[114] However, as well as the infamous 'league tables', ILSAs provide useful information about the range of achievement, and on equity indicators at individual and school levels.

Salisbury et al. noted that in the early cycles of ILSAs (up to 2011), Northern Ireland had a smaller spread of achievement scores and a weaker

[112] For example, B. Burge, R. Classick, T. Paxman and D. Thomas, *TIMSS 2019 in Northern Ireland: mathematics and science* (Slough, 2020); E. Eivers, L. Gilleece and E. Delaney, *Reading achievement in PIRLS 2016: initial report for Ireland* (Dublin, 2017); R. Perkins and A. Clerkin, *TIMSS 2019: Ireland's results in mathematics and science* (Dublin, 2020); J. Sizmur, R. Ager, R. Classick and L. Lynn, *PIRLS 2016 in Northern Ireland: reading achievement* (Slough, 2017).

[113] J. Sizmur, R. Ager, J. Bradshaw, R. Classick, M. Galvis, J. Packer, et al., *Achievement of 15-year-old pupils in Northern Ireland: PISA 2018* (Slough, 2019).

[114] C. McKeown, S. Denner, S. McAteer, D. Shiel and L. O'Keeffe, *Learning for the future: the performance of 15-year-olds in Ireland on reading literacy, science and mathematics in PISA 2018* (Dublin, 2019); Perkins and Clerkin, *TIMSS 2019*.

than average link between family SES and learner achievement at primary level, whereas at post-primary level the spread of achievement tended to be larger than average and the link between family SES and learner achievement stronger than average.[115] In other words, individual equity indicators were stronger at primary than at post-primary level. However, data from more recent ILSAs suggest that some measures at primary have disimproved, especially in mathematics,[116] whereas at post-primary level, learners from disadvantaged backgrounds have narrowed the gap on PISA reading and mathematics.[117] In contrast, an OECD review identifies Ireland as one of fourteen countries where 'equity did not improve over PISA cycles in any of the cognitive domains assessed'.[118]

As well as looking at the individual, differences in performance on ILSAs can be partitioned into those explained by between- and within-school variance. The former is a measure of the extent to which schools differ in terms of average learner performance. In more equitable systems, schools tend to be more alike in outcome. Martin et al. found that between-school variance in both Ireland and Northern Ireland was about half the international average for reading, two-thirds the average for mathematics, and about four-fifths the average for science.[119] Thus, there tends to be relatively little difference between learner outcomes by primary school in both Northern Ireland and Ireland. Where differences between schools do arise, they are largest for science. At post-primary level, however, between-school variance across all three domains (reading, mathematics and science) tends to be larger than the OECD average in Northern Ireland and smaller than the average in Ireland.[120] Put simply, post-primary schools in Northern Ireland differ more in outcomes than do schools in Ireland.

[115] Salisbury et al., *Independent review of the Common Funding Scheme.*

[116] J. Bradshaw, G. De Lazzari and J. Andrade, *Performance in TIMSS 2015 of disadvantaged pupils in Northern Ireland* (Slough, 2018); Burge et al., *TIMSS 2019 in Northern Ireland.*

[117] Sizmur et al., *Achievement of 15-year-old pupils in Northern Ireland.*

[118] OECD, *Equity in education: breaking down barriers to social mobility* (Paris, 2018), available at: https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264073234-en (18 May 2023).

[119] M. Martin, P. Foy, I. Mullis and L. O'Dwyer, 'Effective schools in reading, mathematics, and science at the fourth grade', in M.O. Martin and I.V.S. Mullis (eds), *TIMSS and PIRLS 2011: Relationships among reading, mathematics, and science achievement at the fourth grade—implications for early learning* (Chestnut Hill, MA, 2013).

[120] L. Gilleece and A. Clerkin, 'A review of the school effectiveness literature: lessons for Ireland', *Irish Journal of Education* 43 (2020), 30–60; Sizmur et al., *Achievement of 15-year-old pupils in Northern Ireland*; N. Shure and J. Jerrim, *Achievement of 15-year-olds in Northern Ireland: PISA 2015 National Report* (London, 2016).

As recent research concluded, 'In creating education systems where children at such an early stage of their development can be deemed winners and losers, the winners enjoy the advantages, but ultimately, the losers suffer the most.'[121] However, despite sustained criticism of academic selection in numerous official reports—by the OECD, the Community Relations Council, the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People and others—and in considerable research,[122] a small number of politicians have held steadfastly to this system. The Equality Commission for Northern Ireland stated that the 'transfer test, and academic selection, contributes to social exclusion and that is heavily influenced by social class'.[123] It might be concluded that Ireland is better placed to further reduce academic under-achievement given that it has not embraced academic selection as a public policy. The Northern Ireland government has no transfer test policy and does not administer academic selection. However, political support from some quarters and a number of Grammar schools steadfastly preserving the current system with the support of mainly middle-class parents continue to allow, in Tomaševski's phrase, 'inter-generational transmission of privilege' to appear appropriate in describing that part of Northern Ireland's education system.[124]

Targeting disadvantage

Both Northern Ireland and Ireland have for many years had policies and a variety of initiatives to address educational disadvantage, meaning that comprehensive coverage of the many local and smaller-scale activities is beyond the scope of this paper. Thus, this section focuses on the main drivers in each jurisdiction for addressing disadvantage within compulsory education:

[121] Brown et al., 'Rise and fall and rise of academic selection', 498.

[122] M. Brown, C. Skerritt, S. Roulston, M. Milliken, G. McNamara and J. O'Hara, 'The evolution of academic selection in Northern Ireland', in B. Walsh (ed.), *Education policy in Ireland since 1922* (Cham, 2022); Brown et al., 'Rise and fall and rise of academic selection'; S. Roulston and M. Milliken 'Academic selection and the transfer test', Transforming Education Briefing Paper (2021), available at: https://www.ulster.ac.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0010/828901/TEUU-Report-10-Academic-Selection.pdf (18 May 2023); Furlong and Lunt, 'Social mobility and higher education'; Shewbridge et al., *OECD Reviews of Evaluation and Assessment in Education*; Connolly et al., *Advancing shared education.*

[123] Equality Commission Northern Ireland, *Key inequalities in education*, Annex 1, 14.4 (2017), available at: https://www.equalityni.org/KeyInequalities-Education (18 May 2023).

[124] L. Henderson, 'Children's education rights at the transition to secondary education: school choice in Northern Ireland', *British Educational Research Journal* 46 (5) (2020), 1131–51.

Targeting Social Need (TSN) and Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS).

In Northern Ireland, educational disadvantage is recognised as multifaceted,[125] and is mainly addressed via TSN funds. In 2022, more than £70m in TSN funds was allocated to schools via the Common Funding Scheme,[126] which uses a formula-based method to distribute most of the Northern Ireland education budget.[127] While this is a sizeable sum, it is dwarfed by a tentative estimate of £226m spent every year supporting duplication and division in schooling.[128] Further, Northern Ireland is a relatively poor region of the UK and 28.4% of all children qualify for free school meals (37.1% in non-Grammar schools[129]), suggesting that many schools require significant additional supports.

The Common Funding Scheme formula includes an additional learner-level weight for FSME learners, and a further school-level weight for schools with high concentrations of FSME learners. In practice, this means that every school receives *at least some* TSN funding—even those that use academic selection—but that schools with many learners from low-SES backgrounds receive somewhat more TSN funding. The calculation of the formula (including the TSN weightings) and the amount of funding provided annually to each school are publicly available on the Department of Education (Northern Ireland) website.[130] TSN funds are distributed directly to schools, and schools have considerable control over how they manage and spend the TSN budget. While this provides flexibility for schools, concerns have been expressed that it 'may be being spent by schools to plug gaps in general school funding, and not for the purpose for which it was intended'.[131]

[125] Department of Education Northern Ireland, 'Tackling educational disadvantage', available at: https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/articles/tackling-educational-disadvantage (18 May 2023).
[126] Department of Education Northern Ireland, 'Targeting social need', available at: https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/articles/targeting-social-need (24 May 2023).
[127] Salisbury et al., *Independent review of the Common Funding Scheme.*
[128] S. Roulston and M. Milliken, 'The cost of division in Northern Ireland', Transforming Education Briefing Paper (2023), available at: https://www.ief.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/TEUU-Report-18-Divided-Society-Divided-Education.pdf (18 May 2023).
[129] NISRA, 'School meals in Northern Ireland 2020–21', available at: https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/education/School%20Meals%20in%20Northern%20Ireland%202020–21%20statistical%20bulletin.pdf (18 May 2023).
[130] Department of Education Northern Ireland, 'Common funding', available at: https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/articles/common-funding (24 May 2023).
[131] Northern Ireland Commission for Children and Young People, 'A "free" education? The cost of education in Northern Ireland' (2017), 12, available at: https://www.niccy.org/cost-of-education/ (18 May 2023).

Ireland's main mechanism for targeting educational disadvantage is the DEIS programme, first introduced into 750 schools in the 2006/07 school year and subsequently expanded on several occasions. There are now 1,194 DEIS schools, of which 235 are at post-primary level.[132] In contrast to TSN, DEIS is not part of schools' core funding, but is an add-on model. Only some schools receive funds, and neither the formulae used nor the amount of core and/or DEIS funding provided to individual schools is revealed. Only 'headline' figures are shared (e.g. the total DEIS budget in 2022/23 was €180m). As is the case with Northern Ireland, while the DEIS funds are sizeable, they make up only a very small proportion of the overall education budget (€9.6bn in 2023).

Most DEIS funding is ring-fenced for centrally agreed additional staffing. The latter includes additional classroom teachers, home school community liaison coordinator posts and access to the School Completion Programme, all of which are centrally agreed and funded, with schools having little input into which and how many posts they are allocated.[133] However, over 10% of the DEIS budget (almost €20m in 2022) is distributed directly to participating schools, as a graduated 'DEIS grant'.[134] The grant is ring-fenced in that it must be used to target 'educational disadvantage', but schools have considerable flexibility on *how* they do so.

There are some similarities in approach between TSN and DEIS. For example, both models allow schools reasonable flexibility over how they spend the targeted funds to which they have access, and both use a gradated approach, with proportionally more funds allocated to schools with proportionally more disadvantaged learners. This is because both DEIS and the Common Funding Formula explicitly target the so-called school context/multiplier effect, whereby schools with high concentrations of learners from disadvantaged backgrounds can exert a negative influence on achievement and attainment, even after taking a learner's own socio-economic background into account.[135] However, Ireland adds an additional level of complexity to targeted funding by including rural/urban weightings at primary level. As Irish

[132] Department of Education, 'Minister Foley announces €32 million major expansion of the DEIS programme incorporating 310 new schools' (2023), available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/71054-minister-foley-announces-32-million-major-expansion-of-the-deis-programme-incorporating-310-new-schools/ (18 May 2023).

[133] Department of Education, 'DEIS delivering equality of opportunity in schools' (2020), available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/policy-information/4018ea-deis-delivering-equality-of-opportunity-in-schools/ (18 May 2023).

[134] M. Killilea, Department of Education, personal communication, 24 February 2023.

[135] For a review, see S. Weir, L. Kavanagh, C. Kelleher and E. Moran, *Addressing educational disadvantage: a review of evidence from the international literature and of strategy in Ireland: an update since 2005* (Dublin, 2017).

research has found that the link between socio-economic background and educational outcomes is weaker in rural than in urban primary schools, urban primary schools receive proportionally more supports than rural schools.[136] In contrast, there is no urban/rural aspect to TSN weights, although it seems plausible that the rural context exerts a similar moderating influence in Northern Ireland.

Both TSN and DEIS funds also use area-based deprivation indicators, drawn from Census data, to calculate each school's additional targeted funding. Because both Ireland and Northern Ireland permit school choice, the deprivation index is not based on the school's geographic location, but on aggregated learner location indices. This means, for example, that a school in a relatively deprived area but with a learner intake mainly from more advantaged areas will receive funds based on its *intake*, not its location. Monitoring of the efficacy of targeted funding is also a strong feature in both jurisdictions. In Ireland, DEIS is monitored at programme level, typically comparing DEIS and non-DEIS schools on various outcome indicators. Clearly, this is not possible in Northern Ireland as all schools receive TSN funds. Instead, efficacy of TSN funds is typically monitored at the level of the school, and the overall system.

Evidence of efficacy typically draws on achievement and attainment data,[137] as well as popular perception. Educational attainment has been discussed earlier, when we compared overall rates of early school leaving and ELETs. However, it is also worth examining the attainment *gaps* by SES. In both Ireland and Northern Ireland there are large differences in attainment by social class, but these have fallen in recent years. In Ireland, the most recent data show that just over 96% of learners in DEIS schools completed Junior Certificate, and just over 86% completed Leaving Certificate. The percentage difference in retention rates between DEIS and non-DEIS schools has fallen from 15.6% (when data collection began twelve years ago) to 7.6% for the most recent cohort.[138]

In a related vein, the review of the Common Funding Scheme noted that while there had been noticeable increases in the percentages of FSME learners obtaining at least five 'good' (grades A*–C) GCSEs, or five good GCSEs

[136] Weir et al., *Addressing educational disadvantage*.
[137] 'Attainment' and 'achievement' are often used interchangeably, but in this context attainment refers to attaining a qualification whereas achievement refers to skills and knowledge acquired (typically measured by performance on standardised tests).
[138] Department of Education, *Retention rates of pupils in second-level schools: 2015 entry cohort*.

including English and maths, in the years preceding the review, the *gap* between FSME and non-FSME had in fact increased slightly.[139] The lack of progress in reducing the attainment gap was one of the arguments Salisbury et al. advanced for increasing the amount of targeted funding. For the 2010/11 cohort, they reported an attainment gap of 33.4% for 5+ good GCSEs, including English and maths: a gap that reduced to 24.0% by the 2020/21 cohort.[140] However, the narrowing of the gap was significantly accelerated by teacher-assessed grades in 2020 and 2021, as the equivalent gap in 2019 was 29.0%. In sum, the socio-economic attainment gap has reduced in recent years in both Ireland and Northern Ireland, with the reduction more pronounced in Ireland.

Efficacy can also be examined through the lens of achievement (on standardised assessments such as Key Stages or national and international assessments). Again, learners in both countries—on average—demonstrate relatively high levels of achievement when compared to their peers in other countries, but performance differences by socio-economic background are apparent. Regarding DEIS, the ongoing evaluation of the initiative has found that reading and mathematics achievement among primary-level learners in DEIS schools has improved on successive rounds of testing between 2007 and 2016, although performance remains below the national average.[141] However, overall primary school educational achievement has improved significantly in recent years in Ireland, as gauged by national and international assessments,[142] and DEIS learners seem to have improved at a broadly similar rate to the rest of the school population, rather than having narrowed the achievement gap.

Unfortunately, due to an industrial dispute in Northern Ireland, recent Key Stage data that would provide reliable information on achievement by FSME status are not available. However, as noted in the previous section, while primary schools in Northern Ireland tend not to show large differences in learner outcomes, differences between post-primary schools in

[139] Salisbury et al., *Independent review of the Common Funding Scheme.*
[140] NISRA, *Qualifications and destinations of Northern Ireland school leavers.*
[141] L. Kavanagh and S. Weir, *The evaluation of DEIS: the lives and learning of urban primary school pupils, 2007–2016* (Dublin, 2018).
[142] For example, A. Clerkin, R. Perkins and R. Cunningham, *TIMSS 2015 in Ireland: mathematics and science in primary and post-primary schools* (Dublin, 2016); Eivers et al., *Reading achievement in PIRLS 2016*; G. Shiel, L. Kavanagh and D. Millar, *The 2014 National Assessments of English reading and mathematics. Volume 1: Performance report* (Dublin, 2014).

Northern Ireland are larger than averages in Ireland and the OECD),[143] although the performance of disadvantaged learners on PISA 2018 reading and maths assessments did show improvement from previous cycles. This suggests that while TSN funds may help mitigate educational disadvantage and school context effects at primary level, the funds are not sufficient (or sufficiently targeted) to mitigate the effects of academic selection at second level.

Regarding how efforts to address educational disadvantage are perceived, DEIS is generally perceived to offer a more coherent and coordinated approach, with Smyth et al. noting that the DEIS model was reportedly 'much admired by participating primary specialists from Northern Ireland and it was acknowledged that equivalent levels of support were lacking there'.[144] Conversely, DEIS has been criticised because many learners from socio-economically deprived backgrounds are not attending DEIS schools, and thus receive no support.[145] However, as noted earlier, addressing school context effects is a central element of the DEIS model. All programmes developed in Ireland since Kellaghan et al.'s seminal 1995 review of educational disadvantage[146] have adopted a comprehensive and coordinated intervention in a few schools, rather than the more diluted TSN approach across all schools.

In Northern Ireland, TSN and related initiatives have frequently been criticised for not addressing issues such as perceived under-achievement among Protestant boys or with academic selection.[147] It can be argued that there are particular difficulties in working-class Protestant communities, often ascribed to paramilitarism; the decline of employment in heavy industries such as shipbuilding, once dominated by male Protestants; and the decline of community networks.[148] Recent large-scale analysis of educational achievement using comprehensive datasets challenges the narrative about working-class Protestant boys. This work 'failed to produce evidence that

[143] Gilleece and Clerkin, 'Review of the school effectiveness literature'; Sizmur et al., *Achievement of 15-year-old pupils in Northern Ireland*; Shure and Jerrim, *Achievement of 15-year-olds in Northern Ireland.*
[144] Smyth et al., *North–South comparison of education and training systems*, 57.
[145] E. Smyth, S. McCoy and G. Kingston, *Learning from the evaluation of DEIS* (Dublin, 2015).
[146] T. Kellaghan, S. Weir, S. Ó hUallacháin and M. Morgan, *Educational disadvantage in Ireland* (Dublin, 1995).
[147] S. Burns, R. Leitch and J. Hughes. *Education inequalities in Northern Ireland: summary report* (Belfast, 2015).
[148] Northern Ireland Assembly, 'Every child deserves a real chance in life: a renewed government focus on solving educational underachievement in Northern Ireland?', *Research Matters* blog, Figure 2 (2020), available at: https://www.assemblyresearchmatters.org/2020/10/12/every-child-deserves-a-real-chance-in-life-a-renewed-government-focus-on-solving-educational-underachievement-in-northern-ireland/ (19 May 2023).

Protestant working class boys are underachieving'.[149] The authors argue for a more nuanced approach to examining the issue, noting that a selective school system and parental qualifications and occupations explained more variance in learner outcomes than religious affiliation. In any case, focusing discussions on under-achievement in working-class children and young people of whatever community misses the point that this issue is largely a consequence of social class differences.

While academic selection is viewed by many as problematic,[150] it seems rather taken for granted within the DENI and by certain political parties. For example, in 2020 an expert panel to examine educational under-achievement was established, with comprehensive terms of reference, yet those terms failed to mention academic selection.[151] The panel noted the omission in their report, commenting that 'as a panel, we feel addressing this systemic inequality should be a priority going forward'.[152]

A recent EU review of equity funding schemes for disadvantaged schools suggests that defining clear objectives and specific target group(s) is essential, while mixed funding models (individual learner characteristics, weighted up in schools with concentrations of learners from a low-SES background) are likely to be more effective than targeting a geographic area.[153] They also suggest that a certain amount of ring-fenced funding, while allowing for some local adaptations, is the most efficient model. Thus, in some regards, the two systems share many characteristics of effective funding models: in particular, the focus on intake characteristics instead of school geographic location. However, Ireland concentrates funds on relatively fewer schools, while Northern Ireland's funds are spread thinly across all schools. Both also have at least some devolved funding, but Ireland places far more constraints on how the targeted funds can be spent, with most funding ring-fenced for clearly defined additional posts. While the ring-fencing of some funds for

[149] E. Early, S. Miller, L. Dunne and J. Moriarty, 'The influence of socio-demographics and school factors on GCSE attainment: results from the first record linkage data in Northern Ireland', *Oxford Review of Education* 49 (2) (2023), 171–89: 183.

[150] Burns, *Education for the twenty-first century*; Costello, *Future post-primary arrangements in Northern Ireland.*

[151] Department of Education Northern Ireland, *Terms of reference (ToR) – Expert Panel Persistent Educational Underachievement* (2020), available at: https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/terms-reference-tor-expert-panel-persistent-educational-underachievement (19 May 2023).

[152] N. Purdy, J. Logue, M. Montgomery, K. O'Hare and J. Redpath, *A fair start: final report and action plan of the Expert Panel on Educational Underachievement in Northern Ireland* (2021), available at: https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/fair-start-final-report-action-plan (19 May 2023).

[153] S. Verelst, H. Bakelants, L. Vandevoort and I. Nicaise, *The governance of equity funding schemes for disadvantaged schools: lessons from national case studies*, NESET report (Luxembourg, 2020).

posts might appear to limit school flexibility, it offers considerable administrative efficiency and means that schools are not individually reinventing their own wheel (or, indeed, using the funds to plug gaps in overall funding). On balance, the achievement and attainment outcomes suggest that the DEIS approach of targeting and restrictions is more effective than TSN's scattergun and less restrictive approach.

Making schools open to all in a changing society

Communities in both Northern Ireland and Ireland are increasingly diverse.[154] Mass immigration is a relatively recent phenomenon in Ireland, meaning that as late as the end of the 1990s Irish classrooms could be described as 'largely mono-cultural, mono-ethnic'.[155] Extremely high levels of immigration during the 'Celtic Tiger' years meant that the composition of classrooms changed entirely within a few years. For example, Eivers notes that the number of 'non-Irish national' children increased by 50% between the 2006 and 2011 Censuses, while the numbers of primary school children who did not usually speak English or Irish at home more than doubled between 2004 and 2009 (and has remained relatively stable, at slightly under 10%, since then). However, the teaching workforce has tended to remain monoethnic.[156]

As a consequence of these rapid demographic shifts, Irish schools are changing. Back in 2013 it was argued that 'traditionally characterised as "Catholic, white and Gaelic", Irish schools are said to be finding it difficult to recognise and acknowledge new expressions of race, culture and religion'.[157] In the five years before 2016, for instance, there was a sharp rise from 16% to 22% of the population of those from non-Catholic backgrounds.[158] Additionally, 'the increase in the number of people stating that they have no religion has been quite spectacular',[159] with more in that category now than in

[154] D. Faas, A. Smith and M. Darmody, 'Between ethos and practice: are Ireland's new multi-denominational primary schools equal and inclusive?', *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education* 49 (4) (2018), 602–18.

[155] E. Eivers, 'Pupils' languages', in E. Eivers and A. Clerkin (eds), *National Schools, international contexts: beyond the PIRLS and TIMSS test results*. (Dublin, 2013), 55–76: 55.

[156] R. McDaid and E. Nowlan, 'Barriers to recognition for migrant teachers in Ireland', *European Educational Research Journal* 21 (2) (2021), 247–64.

[157] M. Parker-Jenkins and M. Masterson, 'No longer "Catholic, White and Gaelic": schools in Ireland coming to terms with cultural diversity', *Irish Educational Studies* 32 (4) (2013), 477–92.

[158] D. Faas, N. Foster and A. Smith, 'Accommodating religious diversity in denominational and multi-belief settings: a cross-sectoral study of the role of ethos and leadership in Irish primary schools', *Educational Review* 72 (5) (2018), 601–16: 601.

[159] Fischer, 'Adapting the school system to the globalisation of Ireland's population', 143.

the Church of Ireland, the second largest religious group in the state. Census data from 2016, the most recent at the time of writing, show a 74% increase from 2011 in those with no religion and a 72% increase in those who did not choose a religion. In contrast, the population who define as Catholic fell from 84% to 78% in the same period.[160] At the same time, the 2011 Census points to increased diversity, with 44 languages other than Irish and English being spoken at home by communities of more than 1,000 people.

Ireland increased its cultural diversity in a very short time, and yet the control of Christian churches, particularly the Catholic Church, over aspects of citizens' lives remains strong. There have been moves to challenge many of the orthodoxies about how schools should be run and, in some cases, what they should teach, especially in religious education classes. Pressure has been mounting on the government of Ireland to ensure that 'there is diversity of provision of school type within educational catchment areas throughout the State which reflects the diversity of religious and non-religious conviction now represented'.[161]

There are a 'rising number of Irish parents who have turned towards alternatives to the denominational schools of their own childhood',[162] and multi-denominational Educate Together schools are increasing in popularity. While still a small sector, there are now 96 primary and 21 post-primary Educate Together schools in Ireland, catering for 34,000 learners[163] in a total school enrolment of over 946,000.[164] There is a strong ethical dimension to Educate Together schools, and learners 'learn about the values, cultures and lifestyles of those that are different to them [and] learn to name difference with a language of respect'.[165] The sector was endorsed by the President of Ireland, Michael D. Higgins, when he recognised Educate Together's role in the 'challenging of a status quo that had existed for many years, one which

[160] Central Statistics Office, *Census of Population 2016 – Profile 8 Irish Travellers, Ethnicity and Religion*, available at: https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cp8iter/p8iter/p8rrc/ (19 May 2022); Central Statistics Office, *Census 2011 Profile 6 Migration and Diversity – A Profile of Diversity in Ireland*, available at: https://www.cso.ie/en/csolatestnews/pressreleases/2012pressreleases/pressreleasecensus2011profile6migrationanddiversity/ (19 May 2022).

[161] Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission, *Religion and education: a human rights perspective* (2011), 104, available at: https://www.ihrec.ie/app/uploads/download/pdf/religionandeducationpdf.pdf (19 May 2023).

[162] Fischer, 'Adapting the school system to the globalisation of Ireland's population', 142.

[163] Educate Together, available at: https://www.educatetogether.ie/about/overview/ (19 May 2022).

[164] Department of Education, 'Key statistics 2020/21 and 2021/2022', available at: https://www.gov.ie/pdf/233674/ (24 May 2023).

[165] G. Mihut and S. McCoy, *Examining the experiences of students, teachers and leaders at Educate Together second-level schools* (Dublin, 2020), 8–9.

many felt no longer reflected all of the needs of an evolving society and a slowly changing demographic, gradually becoming more diverse and more secular'.[166]

Pressures on the established order have not occurred without challenge. Some responses seem to show an acceptance by the church that its influence in education should reduce, as indicated in the recognition by a Catholic archbishop that the 'Catholic Church could divest itself of the patronage of a significant number of the national schools in areas where there was no longer a need or a demand for so many with a Catholic ethos'.[167] On the other hand, some in the church argue that the present system brings many benefits to Ireland, as 'from the point of view of public administration and expenditure, it is difficult to envisage a cheaper system',[168] and appear resistant to widespread change.

Northern Ireland has similar issues to those of Ireland, and the 2021 Census shows over 6.5% of the population born outside the UK or Ireland, an increase from 4.5% in 2011. The country of birth of those residents indicates that only 1.5% of the overall population, the largest proportion, come from the Middle East and Asia, while those born in African countries or South America constitute only 0.6% and 0.1% respectively.[169] This would suggest that, while growing, immigration is slightly later and at a slightly slower pace in Northern Ireland compared to Ireland, and that proportions of 'new Northern Irish' are still well below levels in Ireland. Migration into Northern Ireland has changed the composition of the population and newcomer learners, who do not have sufficient language skills to participate fully in the school curriculum, make up 5% of the school population. Approximately 89 first languages are spoken by learners, with Polish and Lithuanian being the most common after English.[170] This is similar to Ireland, where Polish, UK and Lithuanian are the main nationalities.[171] Meanwhile Northern Irish pre-service teachers feel

[166] M.D. Higgins Speech at Educate Together AGM, 21 May 2016, available at: https://www.president.ie/en/media-library/speeches/speech-at-educate-together-agm (19 May 2022).
[167] R. Quinn, 'The future development of education in Ireland', *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* 101 (402) (2012), 123–38: 134.
[168] P. Connolly, 'Religion and the primary school', *The Furrow* 65 (4) (2014), 203–11: 210.
[169] NISRA, *Census 2021 main statistics demography tables – country of birth* (2022), available at: https://www.nisra.gov.uk/publications/census-2021-main-statistics-demography-tables-country-of-birth (19 May 2022).
[170] NISRA, *Annual enrolments at schools and in funded pre-school education in Northern Ireland 2020–21* (2021), 15, available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/annual-enrolments-at-schools-and-in-funded-pre-school-education-in-northern-ireland-2020–21 (19 May 2022).
[171] Central Statistics Office, *Census 2011 Profile 6.*

under-prepared to deal with diversity in the classroom, although they see the importance of doing so,[172] and the need to prepare pre-service teachers to deal with controversial issues in the classroom is being increasingly recognised.[173]

There has been some reduction of religiosity in Northern Ireland also. While church attendance is still relatively high despite a reduction in frequency of attendance,[174] secularisation has increased like elsewhere across Europe, albeit later than in most other countries.[175] The 2021 Census in Northern Ireland shows a proportional decline in all religious groupings apart from Catholics, which increased by 1.6 percentage points to 42.3%. For the first time, those identifying as 'no religion/not stated' were proportionally higher (19%) than even the largest Protestant grouping, Presbyterian (16.6%), although Protestants overall still made up 41.9% of the population.[176]

With its roots in a parent-led movement established in the early 1970s at the height of the intercommunal conflict in Northern Ireland, the first integrated school, Lagan College, was opened in 1981. Aimed at providing 'a learning environment where children and young people from Catholic and Protestant backgrounds, as well as those of other faiths, and none, can learn with, from and about each other',[177] integrated schooling received political support in the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement in 1998. While both Educate Together schools in Ireland and the Integrated schools' movement in Northern Ireland are growing, Integrated education is proportionally a stronger force, with around 7.5% of all children in Northern Ireland attending Integrated schools compared to around 3.6% in Educate Together schools in Ireland. Both systems are expanding: the number of integrated schools in Northern Ireland grew by four in September 2021 and all new mainstream primary schools opened in Ireland in the five years to 2021 were multi-denominational in ethos.[178] Those who attend integrated schools have been shown to develop more moderate

[172] A. Montgomery and C. McGlynn, 'New peace, new teachers: student teachers' perspectives of diversity and community relations in Northern Ireland', *Teaching and Teacher Education* 25 (3) (2009), 391–99.
[173] J.L. Pace, 'Contained risk-taking: preparing preservice teachers to teach controversial issues in three countries', *Theory and Research in Social Education* 47 (2) (2019), 228–60.
[174] B.C. Hayes and A. McKinnon, 'Belonging without believing: religion and attitudes towards gay marriage and abortion rights in Northern Ireland', *Religion, State & Society* 46 (4) (2018), 351–366.
[175] B.C. Hayes and I. McAllister, *The political impact of secularisation in Northern Ireland* (Dublin, 2004).
[176] NISRA, *Census 2021 – Religion 1861–2021*, available at: https://www.nisra.gov.uk/system/files/statistics/census-2021-ms-b22.xlsx (19 May 2022).
[177] Council for Integrated Education, 'The NICIE Statement of Principles', available at: https://nicie.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/NICIE-Statement-of-Principles.pdf (19 May 2022).
[178] Department of Education, *Statistical Bulletin July 2021 Overview of Education 2000–2020*, 4.

political views[179] and to have more cross-community friendships,[180] with an enduringly positive impact on addressing sectarianism.[181]

However, over 90% of Northern Ireland learners are educated in schools alongside others mainly from the same community, often not encountering those from other communities until they enter employment or university. Faith schools are not uncommon elsewhere in the UK and further afield, but in Northern Ireland most young people attending single-faith schools also are resident in single-faith areas, which diminishes further any prospect of contact across the divide.

Curriculum and assessment

Understandably, after a century of separate development, the curriculum, pedagogic approach and assessment in Ireland and Northern Ireland are markedly different. There has been some recent convergence with the reform in 2015 of an amended version of Ireland's Junior Certificate—the Junior Cycle Profile of Achievement, a national examination for learners after the first three years of post-primary education.[182] This introduced fundamental changes to approaches to learning, teaching, curriculum and assessment. The rationale behind the reforms has been questioned by some,[183] and school-based assessment, an important aspect of the reform, was contested by many teacher organisations at the time.[184] However, there was a logic in reforming the Junior Certificate given that the vast majority of learners continue to attend school after that level, and it signalled a reform to approaches to teaching and assessment, including enquiry-based learning and more active forms of teaching and learning.

The Leaving Certificate in Ireland is the terminal examination of the post-primary system at the end of the Senior Cycle, determining, for example,

[179] N. Tausch, M. Hewstone, J.B. Kenworthy, C. Psaltis, K. Schmid, J.R. Popan, et al., 'Secondary transfer effects of intergroup contact: alternative accounts and underlying processes', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 99 (2) (2010), 282–302.

[180] C. McGlynn, U. Niens, E. Cairns and M. Hewstone, 'Moving out of conflict: the contribution of Integrated schools in Northern Ireland to identity, attitudes, forgiveness and reconciliation', *Journal of Peace Education* 1 (2) (2004), 147–63.

[181] B. Hayes, I. McAllister and L. Dowds, 'Integrated education, intergroup relations, and political identities in Northern Ireland', *Social Problems* 54 (4) (2007), 454–82.

[182] A. MacPhail, J. Halbert and H. O'Neill, 'The development of assessment policy in Ireland: a story of junior cycle reform', *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy and Practice* 25 (3) (2018), 310–26.

[183] L. Printer, 'A critical analysis of the rationales underpinning the introduction of Ireland's Framework for Junior Cycle', *Irish Educational Studies*, 39 (3) (2020), 319–35.

[184] B. McManus, 'School assessment is the key to proper reform of junior cycle', *Irish Times*, 13 January 2015.

university entrance. It has been criticised for 'the reliance on memory recall over higher-order thinking skills in the assessment process',[185] and that, in turn, skews teaching and learning. There has been some reform, with curriculum change and novel forms of assessment in many subjects, but concerns remain as to the impact on young people of an examination perceived to be so high-stakes. The higher education minister said 'the Leaving Cert is long and tested and there are good points, but we should be willing to open our minds to actually have a discussion about how we can do better by students'.[186]

Transition Year (TY) is an aspect of the education system in Ireland for which there is no parallel in Northern Ireland. This year between the completion of the Junior Cycle and the start of the Senior Cycle has a strong focus on active citizenship and personal and social development.[187] Whether a school offers TY and whether it is mandatory or optional is devolved to individual schools' boards of management, although most do offer it; learners in 661 of the 714 post-primary schools are involved in TY.[188] Although there are some, generally unfounded, parental concerns about loss of academic focus, overall there appears to be strong support for TY as a positive and valuable opportunity for personal development.[189]

One contrast in the two jurisdictions is in the teaching of Irish. While Irish may be offered in some Catholic Maintained schools in Northern Ireland, it is not an option on the curriculum in Controlled schools and, for many years, its place in the timetable was restricted.[190] As a result, in a survey of adults in Northern Ireland, only a small proportion of Catholics and virtually no Protestants reported having learned Irish at school.[191] Irish-medium education (IME) appears to have revitalised the learning of Irish in

[185] N. Baker, 'UN committee asks Ireland about efforts to reform Leaving Certificate', *Irish Examiner*, 4 November 2020.

[186] L. Boland, 'Reform needed on Leaving Certificate and CAO application, says higher education minister', *The Journal*, 20 March 2021, available at: https://www.thejournal.ie/leaving-cert-cao-reform-5387038-Mar2021/ (19 May 2022).

[187] G. Jeffers, 'The Transition Year programme in Ireland: embracing and resisting a curriculum innovation', *Curriculum Journal* 22 (1) (2011), 61–76.

[188] S. Wayman, 'Transition Year: a time to grow or just an excuse to doss?, *Irish Times*, 5 March 2018.

[189] A. Clerkin, 'Who participates? Predicting student self-selection into a developmental year in secondary education', *Educational Psychology* 38 (9) (2018), 1083–105.

[190] J. Ruane and J. Todd, *The dynamics of conflict in Northern Ireland: power, conflict and emancipation* (Cambridge, 1996), 182.

[191] P. Ó Riagáin, 'Relationships between attitudes to Irish, social class, religion and national identity in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland', *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism* 10 (4) (2007), 369–93: 373.

Northern Ireland, whether in standalone Irish-medium schools or in Irish-medium units attached to English-medium schools.[192] The first all-Irish primary school opened in 1971 with just nine learners; in 2021–22 there were over 7,000 learners in IME, with almost 5,700 learners in dedicated IME schools and preschools and the remainder in Irish-medium units.[193] However, although these data are a little dated, attitudinal support for Irish by Protestants is very limited,[194] although overall attitudes to Irish in schools on both sides of the border appear to be becoming more positive.[195] It is also noteworthy that the Turas project in East Belfast, a Protestant heartland, is having considerable success in promoting the Irish language and has overseen the development of an Irish-medium preschool facility within the Protestant community.[196]

In Ireland, Irish is a compulsory subject in all primary and post-primary schools, whether English-medium, Irish-medium or Gaeltacht. In English-medium primary schools, Irish is taught as a subject to middle and senior classes through the medium of Irish for a minimum of 3.5 hours each week. Some worry about the level of linguistic competency of some of the teachers required to teach it, particularly generalist teachers, and changes to initial teacher education are proposed.[197]

There may be differences too in the teaching of other subjects, particularly history and citizenship. A full discussion of current differences in content and approach and the challenges and opportunities that changing and more closely aligning curricula and teaching strategies might present is outside the scope of this paper. However, some of the difficulties have been highlighted elsewhere.[198]

[192] D.P. Ó Baoill, 'Origins of Irish-medium education: the dynamic core of language revitalisation in Northern Ireland', *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism* 10 (4) (2007), 410–27.
[193] Department of Education, 'Post-primary schools enrolment figures' (2022), available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/post-primary-schools/; Department of Education, 'Primary schools 2021/2022', 2022, available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/primary-schools/#20212022 (24 May 2023).
[194] Ó Baoill, 'Origins of Irish-medium education', 385.
[195] N. Ní Scolláin, 'Stereotypes and linguistic prejudices in Ireland', in A. Dąbrowska, W. Pisarek and G. Stickel (eds), *Stereotypes and linguistic prejudices in Europe* (Budapest, 2017), 239–46.
[196] D. Mitchell and M. Miller, 'Reconciliation through language learning? A case study of the Turas Irish language project in East Belfast', *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 42 (2) (2019), 235–53.
[197] A. Ní Dhiorbháin and P. Ó Duibhir, 'Exploring student primary teachers' linguistic knowledge of Irish', *Language Learning Journal* 50 (6) (2022), 732–46.
[198] See for example K.C. Barton, and A.W. McCully, 'Trying to "see things differently": Northern Ireland students' struggle to understand alternative historical perspectives', *Theory and Research in Social Education* 40 (4) (2012), 371–408; C. Donnelly, C. McAuley, D. Blaylock and J. Hughes, 'Teaching about the past in Northern Ireland: avoidance, neutrality, and criticality', *Irish Educational Studies* 40 (1) (2021), 3–18.

In Northern Ireland, the National Curriculum, which had mirrored the approach in England and Wales, was replaced from 2007 by the revised Northern Ireland Curriculum, which diverged from England and Wales and was much less prescriptive in terms of content and teaching approaches. The new curriculum from age four to the end of compulsory education at age sixteen aims to meet the needs of learners more effectively than was the case previously, explicitly preparing them for a world that is rapidly changing, where previous skillsets may not be sufficient. The curriculum sets out to equip learners to become lifelong learners and to develop as individuals, as contributors to society, the economy and the environment.[199] There are more opportunities for active learning and a focus on assessment for learning, and increased teacher autonomy. The Junior Certificate Profile of Achievement, developed later in Ireland, seems to have learned a lot from its philosophy and its implementation.

After GCSE examinations, children can opt to remain in school and study for A levels or their equivalent. These too are high-stakes examinations used by universities to determine entry to higher education courses. For many years, Northern Ireland was careful not to stray too far from the assessment regimes dominant in England and Wales. GCSEs and A levels were graded in the same way and exercises were regularly undertaken to ensure consistency in the curricula and comparable rigour of assessment mechanisms across the countries of the UK. More recently, however, Northern Ireland has begun to diverge slightly from the arrangements in England and Wales. Specifications that were able to be assessed as individual units were replaced by terminal examinations in England and Wales; Northern Ireland did not follow suit. The grades at GCSE in England and Wales were changed from A*–U, with A* the highest grade and U the lowest, to 9, the highest grade, down to 1. Again, Northern Ireland did not follow suit, although it did amend its grade structure to make it easier to map grades from one system to the other. It remains to be seen whether these different approaches are temporary or presage further divergence.

Differences in curriculum, assessment and qualifications between Ireland and Northern Ireland, as well as the lack of equivalence in age at transfer to post-primary schools, were among the reasons advanced for not progressing with an imaginative proposal to find a collaborative cross-border solution for a post-primary school in Fermanagh that was facing closure. It was decided that this option was an 'unproven concept … best placed as

[199] Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment, *The Northern Ireland Curriculum (Primary)* (2007), available at: https://ccea.org.uk/learning-resources/northern-ireland-curriculum-primary

part of an educational policy and long-term strategy for the delivery of such schools',[200] and the school closed in 2021. Earlier, in 2017, a similar proposal for a cross-border confederation solution for a primary school facing closure in Armagh was seen as having merit in its innovative approach to area planning, but was ultimately rejected for a range of reasons including the ten-mile distance between the two schools in the proposed federation. The Northern Ireland school closed in 2017.[201]

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

There are certainly serious shortcomings within Northern Ireland's education system, and structural issues that require attention. However, while they are possibly less challenging than those in Northern Ireland, Ireland too has its issues with education. There is a need for the two jurisdictions to learn from each other and other systems and to move towards systems of education that meet the needs of all, not just the privileged minority.

Northern Ireland has, until recently, looked east to follow closely the shifting educational policies emanating from Westminster, but there may be much to learn from looking south as well. There is a pressure not to diverge too far from Great Britain as that might pose political difficulties for those who wish to emphasise their Britishness, and their differences with the rest of the island. There is also a pragmatic decision not to disadvantage Northern Ireland learners in applying for universities in Great Britain . Depending on the political party that holds the minister of education brief in the Northern Ireland Assembly, the idea of divergence from Great Britain and some adoption of educational policies that have worked successfully in Ireland may be more or less sympathetically considered.

A lot, however, comes back to the influence of some bodies on the implementation and enactment of educational policies in Northern Ireland's education system more generally. One example is the dogged retention in Northern Ireland of an 11+ system despite the overwhelming evidence that it

[200] Council for Catholic Maintained Schools, 'St Mary's High School, Brollagh: The case for change' (2019), in Department of Education, *DP584 – St Mary's High School, Brollagh* (Appendix B) (2021), 20, available at: https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/dp-584-st-marys-high-school-brollagh-0 (19 May 2023).
[201] Department of Education Northern Ireland, *DP470 – Anamar Primary School* (2017), available at: https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/dp-470-anamar-primary-school (24 May 2023).

contributes to generating inequalities across the system. Arguably, that single policy may be the biggest structural barrier to positive change to education in Northern Ireland.

It is worth emphasising that there is considerable commonality in the two systems. Both have a history of small schools in rural areas, which may be seen as offering a strong community presence, but may be under threat with tightening budgets; a strategy of small school rationalisation is particularly evident in Northern Ireland. School inspections and collaboration between the inspectorates provide opportunities for learning for and from both jurisdictions. Some aspects of assessment also appear to indicate a degree of commonality, even though there are many nuanced differences. One interesting development is the potential for federated schools spanning the border which, while ultimately unsuccessful in the instances proposed so far, were not rejected out of hand by the authorities in either jurisdiction.

Future constitution change on the island of Ireland cannot be assumed at this point. It may not happen for many years, or at all. However, recent changes in supra-national political arrangements, namely Brexit, appear to have changed the political landscape and some are convinced that constitutional change may not be far away. Should political developments result in Northern Ireland's and Ireland's education systems becoming more closely aligned again, considerable work would be required as educational structures on the two sides of the border have diverged significantly in the century since partition. There are disparities in school structures, in teacher pay and in transfer to post-primary schools, for example. School governance structures are also very different currently.

We can speculate about some of the challenges and potential solutions if there were a move to an all-Ireland state. Could local control over Controlled schools be retained in Northern Ireland, for example, to reassure unionists? Might any change allow a move to a more pluralist, and potentially secular, state system across the island? Could Irish schools move towards a more socially inclusive education system that delivered for all learners? How would disadvantage be best addressed? The DEIS system has largely been heralded as a success, but taking account of the number of children who are disadvantaged in delegating budgets to all schools might have merit, particularly if that funding were ring-fenced. The differences in educational outcomes are very great and considerable efforts will be required to align outcomes more closely across the island, but how could that be achieved? Academic selection continues to be seen as detrimental to the whole educational system and

wider society in Northern Ireland but seems resilient in the face of almost unanimous criticism: how much would change in a different arrangement, and to what extent might sectional pressures remain unchanged?

It is a paradox that even though the curriculum in both jurisdictions, apart from perhaps history, citizenship and Irish, is more in alignment than other aspects of the education systems, establishing congruence at all levels would not be straightforward. It is salutary to note that the implementation of the Revised Curriculum in Northern Ireland took over a decade and the debate over the Leaving Certificate has been going on for even longer than that in Ireland without any sign of resolution, and yet both of those changes are comparatively minor compared to the realignment of two systems. There are certainly advantages to be gained from each education system adopting successful approaches used in the other, but the perceived threat to some communities on either side of the border may militate against the potential benefits that might accrue in a closer alignment. Some Northern Ireland politicians, keen to avoid any alienation of their electoral base, may be more comfortable to follow a poorly performing England and Wales model of education instead of the politically awkward adoption of innovations from Ireland. Much will rest on political developments in Northern Ireland over the next few years and whether political leaders there can lead, rather than be led.