

PIRLS 2021:
**Exploring the contexts for reading of
primary school pupils in Ireland**

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Chapter 2: Policy Context of PIRLS 2021 in Ireland

PIRLS 2021 took place following a decade of intensified emphasis on literacy within educational policy in Ireland. This included the rollout of the *National Strategy: Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life 2011-2020*, which covered the period up to and including 2020 (Department of Education and Skills, 2011b) and the redevelopment of the Primary Language Curriculum (PLC) for the first time since 1999 (Department of Education and Skills & NCCA, 2019). The growing importance of digital literacy was referenced both through the PLC and in the *Digital Strategy for Schools 2015-2020* (Department of Education and Skills, 2015). Since 2005, the DEIS programme has served as the main policy instrument geared at improving equity in education in Ireland. The need for an increased focus on literacy outcomes in DEIS Urban schools in particular was highlighted in the 2017 interim review of the *National Strategy: Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life 2011-2020* (Department of Education and Skills, 2017d), while the DEIS identification model was updated in the same year, resulting in some additional schools being identified as eligible for DEIS supports (Department of Education and Skills, 2017a).

We might reasonably expect the literacy-learning experiences of the PIRLS 2021 cohort to have been influenced to some degree by these various policy initiatives. However, their experiences will also have been coloured by unprecedented disruptions to education – and to wider society – caused by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021 (Department of Education et al., 2022). Sustained periods of school closures and remote teaching and learning were implemented from March to June 2020 (when the PIRLS cohort were finishing Third Class), and from January to March 2021 (when they were midway through Fourth Class). While schools were generally open for in-person instruction at other times, absence rates were higher than usual due to quarantine periods, and classroom arrangements were often adapted to reduce the risk of virus transmission. To address expected negative impacts of COVID-19 restrictions on children's learning and development, various mitigation measures were introduced, such as the provision of additional funding for digital technology (April 2020); the identification of priority curriculum areas, including literacy (September 2020); the expansion of the summer provision programme (July 2021); and the rollout of a COVID Learning and Support Scheme (CLASS) (September 2021).

This chapter discusses policy developments relating to primary-level literacy education in Ireland between 2011 and 2021, with a focus on those likely to have impacted on the PIRLS 2021 cohort (i.e., those starting Fifth Class in autumn 2021). The first section deals with initiatives introduced within the lifetime of the *National Strategy: Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life 2011-2020*. The second deals with the specifics of the COVID-19 era that immediately preceded the PIRLS 2021 data collection. The third considers the extent to which trends in PIRLS data can or cannot provide insights into the impacts of various policy initiatives, while the fourth sets out the key research questions addressed in this report.

National Strategy: Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life 2011-2020 – Developments in literacy education policy at primary level

The *National Strategy: Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life 2011-2020*, referred to in this section as the *2011 National Strategy* (Department of Education and Skills, 2011b), was developed partly in response to outcomes of the 2009 cycle of PISA, in which the reading achievement of 15-year-old students in Ireland showed an apparent sharp decline relative to previous cycles (Perkins et al., 2010). The *2011 National Strategy* sought to improve literacy and numeracy *outcomes* (at early childhood, primary, and post-primary levels) and *attitudes* (among children, young people, and the general public) through interventions in six key areas:

1. Resources and support for **parents and communities**
2. Professional learning for **early learning and care (ELC) educators and teachers**
3. Capacity-building for **school leaders**
4. Review and update of **curriculum** specifications
5. Targeted resources for **learners with additional needs** (examples listed: those from disadvantaged communities, those learning English as an additional language, and those with special educational needs)
6. More effective approaches to **assessment**, at teacher, school, and system levels

Most pupils in the PIRLS 2021 cohort were born either in 2010 (67.0%) or 2011 (31.6%) – i.e., shortly before or contemporaneously with the introduction of the *2011 National Strategy*. Thus, actions implemented at early childhood and primary levels may have affected them. Literacy-related actions targeted at these levels under each of the six key areas are summarised next. In considering the extent to which planned actions were implemented, we draw on the interim review of the *2011 National Strategy* (Department of Education and Skills, 2017d). A general observation from the interim review was that, overall, there had been a stronger focus on literacy than numeracy in the implementation of the *2011 National Strategy* to that point, although literacy through Irish and digital literacy were highlighted as requiring further attention.

The next subsections use the six key areas of the *2011 National Strategy* to structure a description of relevant actions. Subsequently, the relation of the *2011 National Strategy* to large-scale assessment findings is briefly discussed.

1. Parents and communities

The *2011 National Strategy* aimed to support a national information campaign to raise awareness of the role of parents and communities in fostering children's literacy learning (Department of Education and Skills, 2011b). In practice, a number of relevant actions were implemented, including the development of a website and television series by the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) and the launch of campaigns such as Right to Read (led by Libraries Ireland) and Take the First Step (led by NALA) (Department of Education and Skills, 2017d). However, these tended to be packaged more as discrete initiatives than as part of a continuous, unifying information campaign.

A related aim was to provide better information to parents on specific ways to support their children's language and literacy development. To this end, the interim review noted that materials from NALA's *helpmykidlearn* website were distributed in early learning and care (ELC)

settings. Other materials such as the Aistear Síolta Practice Guide¹⁶ (Government of Ireland, 2015) and parts of the support toolkit for the PLC (Department of Education and Skills & NCCA, 2019), while designed primarily for ELC educators and/or teachers, were considered suitable for parents to use also (although it seems likely that parents with a pre-existing interest in education/literacy would be most likely to access and avail of these). Additionally, the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) produced a targeted Booklet for *Parents of Children and Young People with Special Educational Needs* which described educational supports available in schools (NCSE, 2019).

Schools were requested to work closely with parents to support children's literacy development. Specifically, reports of School Self-Evaluation (SSE) and School Improvement Plans (SIPs) (see the section on "School leaders" below) were to be made available to parents. While many schools implemented this at least to some degree, the interim review in 2017 noted that "the flow of information from schools to parents can still be improved" (Department of Education and Skills, 2017e, p. 24). Another new requirement was for schools to share children's standardised test results, including in English reading (in all schools) and Irish (in Gaeltacht schools and Gaelscoileanna) with parents (see the section on "Assessment" below) at certain intervals. While this requirement was met almost ubiquitously within a few years of its introduction (Kavanagh et al., 2015), appropriate context for interpreting the results was not always provided to parents, and concerns have been raised about parental confusion and anxiety regarding standardised testing (Martinez Sainz et al., 2023; O'Leary et al., 2019). More broadly, in the latter years of the *2011 National Strategy*, a review of school websites found that many did not comprehensively address parents' informational needs (Gilleece & Eivers, 2018), while parental participation in school self-evaluation in Ireland has been viewed as relatively limited in an international context (Brown et al., 2021). Overall, then, there may be scope for further improvement in the extent to which schools and parents work together to develop children's literacy.

2. Early learning and care (ELC) educators and teachers

The ELC landscape in Ireland had been altered substantially since 2010 with the introduction of a universally available, free year of ELC (i.e., shortly prior to the launch of the *2011 National Strategy*). Pupils in the PIRLS 2021 cohort were eligible for this free year, although they were already in primary school by the time the ELC programme was further expanded to two free years from 2016. To bolster the role of ELC in children's educational development, the Aistear Síolta Practice Guide was published (Government of Ireland, 2015), funding and regulatory incentives were brought in to encourage ELC educators to upskill, and education-focused inspections of ELC settings were commenced from 2016. A first composite report on such inspections noted a mixture of strengths and challenges in the sector. Support for language development was one aspect of practice about which recommendations for improvement were made fairly frequently (Inspectorate - Department of Education and Skills, 2018). In 2020, an Insights webinar on the development of literacy was published (Department of Education, 2020). Developed by the Department of Education's Inspectorate, it was designed to share the findings, ideas, and examples of effective literacy practice that had been gathered during inspection visits to thousands of diverse early years' education settings across Ireland. It introduced and explored the development of early reading, and using texts, oral language skills, mark-making and early writing, in a playful, hands-on manner.

The *2011 National Strategy* included several measures aimed at improving the literacy aspect

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Aistear and Síolta are the National Quality Frameworks for Early Childhood Education. These frameworks were merged in the *Aistear Síolta Practice Guide* in 2015.

of Initial Teacher Education (ITE). All primary teaching qualifications in Ireland were lengthened by one year (to four years and two years for undergraduate and postgraduate candidates, respectively), and the emphasis placed on teaching, learning, and assessment of literacy within ITE was increased.

To enhance Continuing Professional Development (CPD) for qualified teachers, dedicated Literacy and Language teams were established within the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST)¹⁷ and all online summer courses for teachers were required to incorporate literacy in their programmes. Data from the National Assessments of Mathematics and English Reading (NAMER) 2014 and PIRLS 2016 indicate a steep increase in uptake of literacy-related CPD by teachers, compared to previous study cycles in 2009 and 2011, respectively (Delaney et al., 2022; Kavanagh et al., 2015). Later, the rollout of the new PLC meant that associated CPD was provided, in the form of a one-day introductory seminar for all schools (2019-2020) and subsequent sustained support was delivered on a phased basis. Sustained support was paused during the COVID-19 pandemic, so it is likely that teachers in some, but not all, of the PIRLS 2021 schools had received this training by the time of testing. Additional pre-recorded webinars were also made available to support the embedding of the curriculum.

The interim review identified digital literacy as a priority area across the continuum of teacher education for the remaining years of the *2011 National Strategy* (Department of Education and Skills, 2017d). Specifically, in line with the *Digital Strategy for Schools 2015-2020*, teachers were to be supported to integrate digital literacy in learning across the curriculum. To support the *Digital Strategy*, a 210-million-euro funding package to help schools invest in education technology infrastructure (but not technical support/maintenance) was issued between 2017 and 2020. Nevertheless, by late 2019/early 2020 (Feerick et al., 2021), about one-third of primary teachers viewed as *poor* or *fair* the availability of digital devices for all their pupils (34%), the age and condition of devices (36%), their school's broadband connection or speed (32%), the availability of suitable software for teaching and learning (30%), and their own awareness of such software (33%). In the same survey, just 6% of primary teachers viewed themselves as *advanced* or *highly advanced* in relation to embedding digital technologies in teaching, learning, and assessment, while nearly three-fifths (59%) saw themselves as below intermediate level in this regard. The move to remote teaching and learning during COVID-19 demanded considerable agility from teachers in relation to use of digital technology, with evidence from Department of Education's Inspectorate surveys suggesting that considerable strides were made in this regard between the first school closure period in mid-2020 and the second one in early 2021 (Department of Education, 2021a).

3. School leaders

The *2011 National Strategy* sought to improve principals' and school leaders' understanding of effective approaches to literacy instruction and of how to use assessment to plan learning, diagnose learning difficulties, and provide evidence of learning (Department of Education and Skills, 2011b).

In addition to increasing the professional development available for principals and school leaders and enhancing the emphasis on literacy within it, a key action in this section of the *2011 National Strategy* was the introduction of a requirement for schools to engage in self-evaluation (SSE). Literacy, alongside numeracy, was to be a key focus of SSE between 2012 and 2016. In

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Since 2023, the PDST has become part of Oide, an integrated support service to support the professional learning of teachers and school leaders in Ireland.

DEIS schools, a requirement to develop a three-year Action Plan for Improvement in relation to several themes, including literacy, had been in place since 2005, with this requirement now constituting the SSE process for these schools (Department of Education and Skills, 2016).

A survey conducted in the 2014/2015 school year, and referenced in the interim review, found that 95% of primary schools had prepared SSE reports and compiled SIPs, respectively. However, a smaller proportion (66%) had made these documents available to the whole school community. While it was acknowledged that SSE would take time to become fully embedded in school practice in Ireland, the interim review noted progress in this area, especially in literacy (“it was perhaps to be expected that most schools initially focused on literacy initiatives, followed by numeracy”) (Department of Education and Skills, 2017e, p. 33). Nevertheless, other research has suggested considerable variation in how SSE has been received and implemented in schools (e.g., Brown et al., 2016).

4. Curriculum

From 2012, Circular Letter 0056/2011 required primary schools to increase by one hour per week the time spent on the development of literacy skills, particularly in the first language of the school (Department of Education and Skills, 2011a). For pupils in First to Sixth Class, this brought the weekly time allocated to English and Irish language combined from 7.5 hours (as allocated in the 1999 Primary School Curriculum) to 8.5 hours. An increase of just over an hour per week was also required for mathematics, meaning that teachers were to re-allocate a total of more than two hours per week to literacy and numeracy. Suggested mechanisms for achieving this included integration of the relevant skills with other curriculum areas, using discretionary curriculum time, re-allocating time spent on other subjects, and “prioritising the curriculum objectives which are considered most valuable in supporting children’s learning”, including by delaying the introduction of elements considered to be lower-priority in some subjects (Department of Education and Skills, 2011a, p. 4). Evidence from NAMER 2014, TIMSS 2015, and PIRLS 2016 suggests that, by and large, teachers were meeting or exceeding these revised time allocation requirements by the midpoint of the 2011 *National Strategy*’s lifetime (Clerkin et al., 2017; Delaney et al., 2022; Kavanagh et al., 2015). While there is an absence of data on time allocated in practice to most other subject areas, a decline in science instructional time was observed in TIMSS 2015, suggesting that schools had probably re-allocated time spent on other subjects to literacy and numeracy.

A longer-term project that began during the lifetime of the 2011 *National Strategy* and continues at the time of writing involved the full redevelopment of the primary curriculum – the first such redevelopment since 1999. Consistent with the priorities identified in the 2011 *National Strategy*, the language and mathematics curriculum specifications were prioritised for review. In 2015, a new PLC was introduced for Junior Infants to Second Class, replacing separate specifications for English and Irish with an integrated specification that sought to foreground the transferability of literacy skills and strategies across languages (NCCA, 2015). Following further consultation, an updated version of the PLC for all primary grade levels was rolled out in 2019 (Department of Education and Skills & NCCA, 2019). As the majority of the PIRLS 2021 cohort started school in autumn 2015, they should, in theory, have received literacy instruction entirely through the lens of the PLC (under the draft specification for junior classes from Junior Infants to Second Class [2015-2016 to 2018-2019] and under the full specification from Third Class to the point of PIRLS testing at the start of Fifth Class [2019-2021]). This contrasts with the situation for PIRLS cohorts from the 2011 and 2016 cycles, both of whom received literacy instruction through the lens of the 1999 curriculum.

While the PLC is in some ways continuous with its predecessors, it also involves new approaches and changed emphases. As there is not scope to explore these in detail here, we provide a very brief overview of selected key points. First, as well as providing an integrated specification for English and Irish, the PLC foregrounds the value of *all* languages, including children's home languages, and the related opportunities for knowledge transfer. Second, in an effort to redirect the focus from teachers to pupils, the PLC replaces the "content objectives" of the 1999 curriculum with far fewer "learning outcomes". Third, the PLC includes an online "toolkit" for teachers featuring support materials, descriptions of learning trajectories ("progression continua"), and video-based examples of good practice. Fourth, a wide-ranging definition of "text" as including "all products of language use: oral, gesture, sign, written, braille, visual, tactile, electronic and digital" points to an expansion of the kinds of communication and interpretation seen as relevant to literacy development (Department of Education and Skills & NCCA, 2019, p. 9). Fifth, the PLC includes a stronger emphasis than its predecessors on the social and playful dimensions of literacy, as well as engagement, motivation, and choice. Sixth, critical literacy skills are introduced earlier and accorded greater weight in comparison with the 1999 curriculum.

Digital literacy is recognised in the PLC as "an important aspect of children's learning", and is at least implicitly integrated within many learning outcomes due to the fact that "text" is defined as including electronic and digital texts (Department of Education and Skills & NCCA, 2019, p. 50). However, a separate document, the Digital Learning Framework (DLF) (Department of Education and Skills, 2017c), itself an element of the *Digital Strategy for Schools 2015-2020*, describes in greater detail some kinds of digital literacy that children are expected to acquire across all areas of the curriculum, including language. The DLF is designed to support schools to plan and assess progress in digital learning as part of their SSE. Among its "statements of highly effective practice" are several that link with critical literacy in the digital realm – for example, that "pupils use a variety of digital technologies for knowledge creation to source, critique, and manage information and to reflect on their learning" (Department of Education and Skills, 2017c, p. 6).

Feedback from teachers prior to the release of the full PLC indicated that aspects of earlier draft versions were found by some to be confusingly worded and/or challenging to use (NCCA, 2014, 2018). While considerable efforts were made to address these issues in the finalised PLC, relatively little has been published to date about the extent to which the PLC as enacted in classrooms may differ from the PLC as intended, or the extent to which enactment of the PLC may vary between classrooms and schools. It is also worth bearing in mind that the PLC's rollout was atypical: while all schools had access to a one-day introductory seminar shortly after its launch, the delivery of a large-scale "sustained support" programme to facilitate its embedding was interrupted due to COVID-19, with online resources substituted for face-to-face support between March 2020 and September 2021.

5. Learners with additional needs

Under this pillar, the *2011 National Strategy* focused primarily on four groups of students with additional needs: (i) those attending schools with high concentrations of social and economic disadvantage; (ii) those whose parents are migrants with a first language other than English or Irish; (iii) those with special educational needs, including the exceptionally able; and (iv) those who have dropped out of school early. Here, we deal with the first three categories as early school-leavers are more relevant in the post-primary than primary context.

The DEIS programme, first launched in 2005 to provide additional resources and supports to schools with more disadvantaged populations, continued to be a key policy response to the needs of the first group (and, to some extent, of the second group also, given that students from

migrant families are often clustered in such schools – e.g., Byrne et al., 2010). At primary level, schools that serve communities assessed as having high levels of deprivation are classified as DEIS Urban Band 1 (the highest level of urban deprivation, to which the highest level of support is allocated), DEIS Urban Band 2, or DEIS Rural. Supports include DEIS grants and access to additional supports for planning and professional development. At the time of testing, other supports that were specific to DEIS schools (but have since been expanded) included book grants and access to the *School Meals Programme*. In DEIS Urban schools, further supports are available, including access to the *School Completion Programme*, Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) Coordinators, and – in DEIS Urban Band 1 schools – reduced pupil-teacher ratios.

As part of the DEIS Plan 2017 (Department of Education and Skills, 2017b), a new model was introduced to identify schools eligible for DEIS supports. This model used the Pobal HP Deprivation Index (Haase & Pratschke, 2017) to assign a probable level of disadvantage to each student based on the small area in which their home was located. Although a decision was taken not to drop any 2005-identified schools from the DEIS programme, regardless of their indicated deprivation level under the new model, 65 primary schools were newly admitted, while about 30 schools already in the programme were assigned to a higher level of support.¹⁸

Regarding the specific needs of students with one or more home languages other than English or Irish, the allocation of teaching posts specifically to support English as an Additional Language (EAL) had been subject to a reduction in 2009 in the context of an economic crisis and resultant budget cuts. The *2011 National Strategy* proposed a redistributed resourcing model that would further reduce the numbers of additional teachers recruited specifically to support EAL, while increasing the emphasis on EAL within ITE and CPD, with the aim of improving whole-school approaches to EAL. This proposal drew on a value-for-money review which had found that the vast majority of EAL funding was spent on additional teachers' salaries with very little spent on CPD (Department of Education and Skills, 2011, as cited in Eivers, 2013).

In practice, the solution implemented involved a broader restructuring of the model whereby posts were provided to support pupils with particular learning needs. Previously, posts for learning support (for pupils with special educational needs) and language support (for pupils learning English as an additional language) had been provided under separate allocations, whereas from 2012 such posts were provided within a combined allocation. Within their allocation, schools had the autonomy to allocate resources to learning support and language support as they saw fit (Department of Education and Skills, 2012). While resource posts to support pupils diagnosed with “low incidence disabilities” continued to be provided for separately at first, a further reform saw these, along with learning support-language support posts, brought within a single Special Education Teacher (SET) allocation from 2017. This SET allocation model was intended to improve equity and access by (i) removing the requirement for pupil assessments to access resource hours (with associated delays, along with the risk that diagnosis might sometimes be conferred for the purpose of resource allocation rather than medical need); (ii) drawing on data intended to be indicative of the specific profile of need within each school, such as standardised test results, rather than simply measures of school size and/or specific categories of special educational needs present, as used previously (Department of Education and Skills, 2017a).¹⁹

18 Since then, further refinement of the model has led to a larger-scale expansion of the programme. However, as this took place from 2022 on, it is not relevant to our consideration of policies that may have impacted on the PIRLS 2021 cohort.

19 From 2022 on, the New Entrant Allocation Scheme provided additional EAL resources to schools in response to the arrival of large numbers of children from Ukraine. However, as this took place after the PIRLS 2021 data collection, it is not relevant to our consideration of policies that may have impacted on the PIRLS 2021 cohort.

While exceptionally able pupils were explicitly included in the *2011 National Strategy's* reference to those with special educational needs, the interim review noted that there was little evidence of progress at national level in this regard (Department of Education and Skills, 2017d). A proposal to produce an updated set of national guidelines on addressing the needs of this group has not yet been enacted; however, the needs of exceptionally able pupils are emphasised in Ireland's new *Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy 2024-2033* (Department of Education, 2024b) and a Departmental group has been established and research initiated to explore the needs of this group.

6. Assessment

A significant departure in the *2011 National Strategy* was the introduction of a requirement for primary schools to administer standardised tests of reading and mathematics at three grade levels (Second, Fourth, and Sixth Classes), to report results to parents, and to report aggregated results to Boards of Management and the Department of Education. While standardised tests had been available for some time previously, schools had varied in the extent to which they had opted to engage with them, and there had been no oversight of test results at national level. The interim review (Department of Education and Skills, 2017d) noted that, while there was good adherence to the new requirement, teachers required professional development in relation to administering standardised tests and interpreting the results. This finding is also evident in other research, such as that conducted by O'Leary et al. (2019) – who identified particular interpretative challenges in relation to standardised test results in DEIS schools and for children with special educational needs – and Pitsia et al. (2021).

It was intended that schools could use standardised test results, along with other assessment data, within the framework of SSE. Alongside SSE, external inspection was noted as an important mechanism for evaluating literacy (and numeracy) provision in schools. The interim review (Department of Education and Skills, 2017d) noted that, since 2012, inspections at both primary and post-primary level indicated that learning outcomes in English (although less so Irish) tended to be highly satisfactory – perhaps reflecting a trend, mentioned above, for schools to focus on literacy more than numeracy in their initial SIPs as part of SSE.

Alongside an increased emphasis on standardised testing within schools, the *2011 National Strategy* included a commitment that Ireland would participate in large-scale national and international assessments (the latter including PIRLS, as well as TIMSS and PISA) to facilitate monitoring of progress and benchmarking of achievement against that of students in other countries. Further, to ensure the robustness and representativeness of the resulting data, schools sampled for such studies were advised that they were expected to participate.

Finally, specific targets for improvement were set based on data from NAMER (at primary level) and PISA (at post-primary level). These targets sought to reduce the proportion of low-achieving students and to increase the proportion of high-achieving students across literacy and numeracy. Following unexpectedly positive outcomes from large-scale assessments conducted between 2014 and 2016 – described in the next section – more ambitious targets to 2020 were established, which included targets specific to students in DEIS Urban Band 1 primary schools (and DEIS post-primary schools).

Monitoring progress in literacy under the *2011 National Strategy*: Findings from large-scale assessments

Although the *2011 National Strategy* targets were originally established as goals to 2020, all primary-level targets were met earlier than anticipated in NAMER 2014, in which overall reading

performance was statistically significantly higher than that in NAMER 2009. The target to reduce by at least five percentage points the proportion of “low achievers” in reading (those at or below proficiency level 1) was exceeded at both Second Class and Sixth Class (reductions of 13 and 10 percentage points, respectively). The target to increase by at least five percentage points the proportion of “high achievers” in reading (those at or above proficiency level 3) was also exceeded at both Second Class and Sixth Class (increases of 11 and nine percentage points, respectively) (Shiel et al., 2014). These encouraging findings were supported by the outcomes of PIRLS 2016, in which pupils in Ireland achieved a mean reading score statistically significantly higher than that achieved in PIRLS 2011 and were outperformed by pupils in only two participating countries (Eivers et al., 2017).

A reconsideration of the targets was therefore considered appropriate as part of the interim review of the *2011 National Strategy* in 2017. In reading, it was desired to further reduce the proportion of “low achievers” to 20% or less at each grade level (from 22% and 25% at Second and Sixth Class, respectively, in NAMER 2014). It was also desired to increase the proportion of “high achievers” to 50% at each grade level (from 46% and 44% at Second and Sixth Class, respectively, in NAMER 2014).

In DEIS Urban Band 1 schools, mean reading achievement remained lower overall than in other school types in NAMER 2014 and PIRLS 2016 (Delaney et al., 2022; Shiel et al., 2014). To focus attention on the need to improve literacy levels in DEIS Urban Band 1 schools, the interim review established tailored targets to 2020 for these schools: namely, to reduce the proportion of “low achievers” to 40% or less (from 44% and 47% at Second Class and Sixth Class, respectively, in NAMER 2014), and to increase the proportion of “high achievers” to 25% or more at Second Class (from 18% in NAMER 2014) and 27% or more at Sixth Class (from 21% in NAMER 2014) (Department of Education and Skills, 2017d).

In 2020, officially the final year of the *2011 National Strategy*, no large-scale assessment data were collected in Ireland. Therefore, NAMER 2021 provided a first opportunity to examine progress in relation to the revised targets, while PIRLS 2021 provided an internationally contextualised perspective. Due to the impact of COVID-19, the reading component of NAMER was administered at Second Class only. Most revised targets for this level were not met, although the target to increase the proportion of “high achievers” within DEIS Urban Band 1 schools to 25% was met. However, average reading achievement did not differ statistically significantly in NAMER 2021 compared to 2014, and the original targets met in 2014 were also met in 2021 (Kiniry et al., 2023; Nelis & Gilleece, 2023).

The PIRLS 2021 results, as described in Chapter 1, painted a similar overall picture: while the necessary caveats meant that there was not sufficient evidence to conclude that mean reading performance had truly improved in Ireland since 2016, the overall standard observed in 2021 was at least as high as that observed in the previous cycle. Within an international context, this pattern was unusual: a majority of trend countries saw statistically significant declines in their mean reading achievement between 2016 and 2021, although this was particularly the case for countries that tested in spring 2021 (unlike Ireland) (Delaney et al., 2023; Mullis et al., 2023).

Examining the outcomes of recent NAMER and PIRLS cycles together, it appears that there was a statistically significant improvement in reading achievement at primary level between 2011 and the middle of that decade (NAMER 2014 and PIRLS 2016), while progress made to then was retained, if not further built upon, in 2021. However, as both NAMER and PIRLS are cross-sectional studies – i.e., each cycle represents a snapshot taken at a specific moment – we cannot

know what shape the trajectory between 2014/2016 and 2021 took. It may be that average reading achievement in Ireland remained roughly similar (a “flat line”) between these time points. Equally, it may be that there was fluctuation not captured by large-scale assessments. For example, it is possible that reading achievement could have improved between 2014/2016 and 2019 and fallen back to somewhere close to 2014/2016 levels in the wake of COVID-19-related disruptions, discussed in the next section.

This uncertainty notwithstanding, it is clear that reading achievement in primary schools in Ireland was higher overall in 2021 than at the starting point of the *2011 National Strategy*. Given the intervention of COVID-19, this seems a positive outcome. It is not possible to conclude that actions implemented under the *2011 National Strategy* caused the improvements observed in NAMER 2014 and PIRLS 2016 – and maintained in NAMER 2021 and PIRLS 2021. However, it should be recognised that the *2011 National Strategy* was a driving force in literacy policy in Ireland during the time when these changes occurred.

COVID-19: The impact and response in primary schools (2020-2021)

March – June 2020: The first lockdown

From March 13, 2020, emergency measures to slow the spread of the COVID-19 virus came into effect in Ireland. These included the physical closure of all schools. There was considerable uncertainty around the expected duration of this closure; in the end, schools would not reopen until the start of the new school year in September 2020. Between March and June 2020, schools were requested to provide remote teaching and learning. The majority of countries around the world also implemented full school closures during this period (UNICEF, 2021). For the PIRLS 2021 cohort in Ireland, this first lockdown coincided with the final months of their Third Class education.

Remote instruction on a large scale was unprecedented in Ireland (as in most countries). In early April 2020, the Department of Education and Skills (hereafter referred to as Department of Education, reflecting its updated name) issued initial guidance for staff of both primary and post-primary schools, which drew on feedback from a number of staff surveys conducted in the earliest days of the lockdown (Department of Education and Skills, 2020a). This guidance noted the importance of trying to foster a sense of normality and continuity for students; recommended “a balance between the assignment of independent work, whether written or practical, online learning and other tasks in accordance with the learning needs of students and the resources available” (p. 3); and advised that, where possible, primary teachers should make every effort to engage with their students on a daily basis. Specific approaches referenced – based on what schools that had responded to surveys reported doing – were phone and email contact; assigning independent work via email, the school website, or online tools/apps; devising tasks linked to learning opportunities in television programmes (notably, those programmes established by public service broadcasters specifically to support remote learning, i.e., Home School Hub and Cúla 4 ar Scoil, as well as documentaries); hosting school assemblies on local community radio or similar platforms; and using video conferencing software to conduct virtual lessons. Teachers were expected to use their professional judgement to select suitable online resources for their pupils’ contexts. Signposting was provided to a one-hour course developed by the PDST to support them to teach and facilitate learning online. The challenges posed to students’ wellbeing by the closures and the wider pandemic context were highlighted, with signposting provided to information developed by the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) in relation to student wellbeing.

Further guidance provided by the Department of Education in late May 2020 was geared specifically at primary schools (Department of Education and Skills, 2020b). It referenced a mid-May change in policy that allowed teachers to access school buildings under some circumstances, meaning that they could now access school IT resources and organise and distribute learning materials. Perhaps reflecting emerging information about remote learning experiences, the previous recommendation of daily contact was attenuated slightly, with teachers now encouraged to “where possible, [...] engage with [...] pupils on a daily basis or at least a number of times each week” (p. 7). Both the April and May documents articulated an awareness of the potential for too much assigned schoolwork to exacerbate pupils’ and parents’ stress during a period of national and international crisis. Standardised testing was cancelled, while schools were encouraged to arrange remote alternatives to end-of-year traditions such as school tours, sports days, and graduation ceremonies.

A survey of primary school parents conducted in April 2020 by the National Parents Council, in collaboration with the Department of Education, indicated that there was considerable variation in perceived experiences. Sixty-five percent of parents indicated that their child’s school made contact more than once a week, while 43% agreed that their child received regular and practical feedback from their teacher on work completed – suggesting that contact and feedback levels overall were substantially lower than those suggested in the guidance. On the other hand, there was stronger agreement that children had established good routines for keeping up with schoolwork (78%) and that children read or were read to regularly during this period (a strikingly high 91%, although respondents to the survey may not have been a representative group) (Department of Education, 2021b – see Appendix [p. 24] for results of the 2020 survey).

A review of research conducted both in Ireland and internationally during this early phase of the COVID-19 pandemic suggested that children were likely to suffer negative impacts including learning loss, increased anxiety, and isolation from friends and normal occupations, with children from more disadvantaged homes and those with special educational needs likely to be more severely impacted (Darmody et al., 2020). Within the Irish primary context specifically, surveys conducted between March and May 2020 indicated relatively high engagement of school staff with pupils and families via email and various apps, but relatively low usage of online lessons. Perhaps relatedly, the prevalence of suitable digital devices for remote learning varied among primary school pupils, as did access to broadband and the extent to which an adult or adults in the home were available to help with schoolwork (J. Burke & Dempsey, 2020; Doyle, 2020; Symonds et al., 2020). Unsurprisingly, pupils with better resources for home schooling reported better engagement with it (Chzhen et al., 2022). Subsequent research with 12-year-olds in Ireland found that just under three-quarters reported having access to a suitable computer during remote learning in March-June 2020, while only half reported having a quiet place to study. The relationship of socioeconomic status with the “digital divide” was evident, with internet connection, device quality, and suitability of study environment all poorer among pupils with low socioeconomic status (Murray et al., 2021).

At primary level, early efforts to mitigate potential harms caused by this first period of school closures included the release of an extra three-million-euro funding package to enable schools to purchase additional digital devices for pupils, the early release of DEIS grants for the 2020-2021 school year, and promotion of the summer programme (Department of Education and Skills, 2020f, 2020g, 2020h). The summer programme, which is opt-in at school level, encompassed two to four weeks of additional education for pupils with various categories of special educational needs, as well as one-week summer camps focusing on literacy, numeracy, and wellbeing for pupils in DEIS schools. Records indicate that 13,608 pupils with special

educational needs participated in the summer programmes in 2020 (3,045 more than in 2019), while about 7,000 participated in the DEIS summer camps (4,500 more than in 2019) (Department of Education, 2022c).

September – December 2020: The first return to the classroom

In July 2020, ahead of the reopening of schools in September – when the PIRLS 2021 cohort in Ireland would start Fourth Class – the Department of Education published *Reopening our schools: The roadmap for the full return to school* (Department of Education and Skills, 2020d). In the context of the continuing risk of a spike in COVID-19 infections, the document noted the need for an overall approach that would “balance the need for a practical and sensible level of caution with the need to provide a supportive environment for pupils/students and where teachers feel able to engage with pupils in a way that supports their learning” (p. 7). In addition to enhanced hand hygiene and school cleaning regimes, physical distancing measures were introduced to limit the spread of the virus. For primary schools, the recommendation was to keep class “bubbles” separate from one another (a bubble being one class and their teacher) and, within each “bubble”, to keep discrete groups or “pods” of children as separate as possible – with at least one metre of distance between individual pods and, if feasible, between individual children within each pod as well. Primary school children were not required to wear face masks, notwithstanding concerns raised by the Irish National Teachers’ Organisation (INTO) in this regard (O’Brien, 2020). Pupils and teachers deemed at “very high risk” from COVID-19 due to medical conditions could continue to engage in remote teaching and learning, with schools required to decide how to allocate resources to this. Additional funding and supports were provided to schools to facilitate the implementation of enhancing cleaning and the reconfiguration of classrooms to allow for physical distancing.

Also in July 2020, guidance on curriculum implementation for the coming school year was issued to schools (Department of Education and Skills, 2020e). The importance of allowing pupils “time, space and planned activities” to facilitate reconnection with their classmates and school staff was highlighted, with the key advice for the initial weeks being to “slow down to catch up” (p. 7). Attention was drawn to the widely varying experiences of pupils during the lockdown – and, in particular, to the heightened risk of learning loss for specific groups of pupils: those with special educational needs, those at risk of educational disadvantage, those with EAL, and those experiencing homelessness or living in direct provision. In this context, the need for teachers to spend time assessing pupils’ needs and to re-teach, revise, and consolidate previous learning, as applicable, was highlighted. Priority curriculum areas were identified for particular focus during the initial weeks of the first term: Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE), Physical Education (PE), Language, and Mathematics. In relation to Language specifically, key messages relating to the implementation of the PLC during the 2020/2021 school year included a focus on playful, interactive learning experiences to support oral language skills; the planning and facilitation of rich conversations featuring high-quality language, including topics to encourage cross-curricular connections; reciting poems from memory and singing songs to foster fluency and creativity with language; an increased focus on explicit language teaching across all curricular areas; access to plenty of reading materials in a range of genres and matched to pupils’ ability and interest, to support their enjoyment of reading; and a balanced approach to teaching handwriting skills and functional and creative writing skills, including through such tasks as researching and presenting project work, recording observations over time, keeping a diary, emailing, script writing, and conducting surveys on family topics.

The Growing Up in Ireland survey data from 12-year-olds collected in December 2020 indicated

that, among those who were still in primary school when they returned to in-person teaching and learning, the majority seemed to find the return fairly smooth (Murray et al., 2021). Large proportions reported that they felt safe from COVID-19 infection in school (51% “always” and 40% “sometimes”) and that teachers went over material to catch up (48% “always” and 43% “sometimes”). While some found schoolwork more difficult than before (6% “always” and 32% “sometimes”), a relatively small proportion reported finding it hard to settle back (4% “always” and 17% “sometimes”). Most 12-year-olds (including those who were in both primary and post-primary school in autumn 2020) felt that their classmates took COVID-19 seriously at least some of the time. Despite these positives, over one in five 12-year-olds reported low mood, and 18% of the group with low mood reported “always” finding it hard to settle back at school (compared to 3% of peers without low mood). Also, it was clear that COVID-19 had a substantial impact on school attendance between September and December 2020: just under 10% of 12-year-olds missed school due to having COVID-19 or its symptoms, while 12% missed school due to having a close contact with COVID-19 or its symptoms outside school. Smaller proportions missed school due to having a close contact in school (3%) or because the whole class or school had to stay home due to infection risk (2%).

In October 2020, the Department of Education issued guidance to primary schools on planning for further remote learning, should this prove necessary – whether in the event of individual pupils needing to isolate, class-level or school-level closures, or a further period of nationwide school closures (Department of Education and Skills, 2020c). Among other obligations, schools were required to identify an appropriate digital communication platform; to identify and develop teachers’ skillsets in relation to the digital competencies required to deliver remote instruction; to give pupils an opportunity to develop the skillsets they would need through frequent opportunities to use the chosen platform, including using it to engage with learning materials and to upload their work; to support equity of access to digital resources by mapping the resource needs among their pupils and planning ways to meet these, e.g., by supplying school devices to pupils with none at home. Required features of remote learning provision included daily communication with pupils (noting, however, that some pupils might not be in a position to engage each day); a blend of direct instruction and independent learning; a focus on engaging learning tasks (with reduced use of workbook and textbook tasks); and two-way feedback between home (parents and pupils) and school (teachers), with ongoing opportunities for pupils to share samples of their work and receive corrections and feedback.

The epidemiological situation in Ireland worsened progressively between October and December 2020. After schools closed for the winter holiday period, the rate of infection became critically high, and, in consequence, schools did not reopen as planned in January 2021. A second period of nationwide closure and remote learning ensued.

January – March 2021: The second lockdown

As the PIRLS cohort moved – remotely – into their second term as Fourth Class pupils, uncertainty about the timeline for reopening schools remained high. However, due to the guidance provided to schools the previous autumn, as well as experience gleaned during the first lockdown, there were now clearer shared expectations for what remote teaching and learning should look like.

The Department of Education’s Inspectorate provided dedicated email and phone support lines to advise schools on remote implementation of the curriculum. The Inspectorate also conducted surveys during this period with principals, parents, and pupils, alongside focus groups with parents.

Reports of these, contrasted with feedback collected during the first lockdown, paint a general picture of improved consistency and communication (Department of Education, 2021b). Most schools indicated that they had put one or more digital communication platforms in place, while most pupils, according to parents surveyed, used digital technology to engage with schoolwork during the second lockdown – although they appeared to engage less often with friends than during the first lockdown. While most primary principals indicated that teachers contacted pupils on a daily basis, a substantial minority of parents and pupils indicated that contact was less frequent. However, most primary pupils reported doing some schoolwork every day while at home, although the time spent on this varied (generally between one and four hours per day). The most commonly reported approach at primary level was for teachers to assign work via an online platform, with some parents in the focus groups expressing a desire for more frequent delivery of live or pre-recorded lessons. Feedback was typically provided via the online platform, email, or phone. Most parents reported that their child received regular feedback from teachers, although the pupils themselves were somewhat less positive in this regard. Most parents also agreed that they had opportunities to contact the school and that children were well supported by schools to engage in their work. In relation to reading specifically, most surveyed parents of primary pupils agreed that their child read or was read to on a regular basis during this period (as was also the case in April 2020).

Pupils and students returned to in-person instruction on a phased basis between February 22 and April 12, 2021, with the PIRLS 2021 cohort returning on March 15 (along with other pupils in Third to Sixth Class).

March – October 2021: The second return to the classroom and PIRLS administration

The PIRLS 2021 cohort completed their last three and a half months of Fourth Class in the classroom; subsequently, after the summer break, they returned to the classroom to start Fifth Class, with PIRLS testing taking place shortly after this.

Again, the Department of Education issued guidance to schools to support pupils' return to in-person learning (Department of Education, 2021e, 2021c). Similar to the guidance issued in summer 2020, emphasis was placed on allowing pupils time to settle back into the school routine and on using observation and other tools to assess their learning needs, especially in literacy and numeracy. Suggested approaches to ease the transition included shorter working periods followed by movement breaks, and assigning no or minimal homework for the first few weeks. Teachers were encouraged to use enquiry-based, creative learning methodologies – outdoors, where possible – and, conversely, to “avoid the over use of teacher-directed and didactic approaches to teaching and learning in an effort to ‘catch up’ or ‘cover lost ground’” (Department of Education, 2021c, p. 1). While standardised testing was mandatory as usual in spring 2021, guidance was issued to note that school closures might impact both on pupils' anxiety around testing and on their results, in some cases, and that this should be borne in mind both when administering the tests and interpreting the outcomes (Department of Education, 2021d).

As part of a continuing effort to mitigate negative effects of the closures, the summer programme was expanded in 2021 to encompass a new “inclusion programme” for pupils with complex needs in mainstream classes and those deemed at risk of educational disadvantage in all schools, as well as the pre-existing programmes for pupils in DEIS schools and pupils with special educational needs in special schools and classes. Records indicate that 18,908 pupils

with special educational needs and 10,738 pupils in DEIS schools (increases of 5,300 and 3,738, respectively, relative to 2020), along with 6,103 pupils eligible under the new “inclusion programme”, participated at primary level in 2021 (Department of Education, 2022c). From September that year, the CLASS was implemented, providing schools with a once-off allocation of additional teaching hours. The idea was that these could be used to provide extra teaching support for those for whom the closure period had exacerbated the risk of learning loss and/or early school leaving. As part of the scheme, an online forum was created in which schools could share information about mitigation strategies that worked well for them.

Thus far, this section has explored the COVID-19-related mitigation measures likely to have affected the PIRLS 2021 cohort. It is beyond the intended scope to consider policy changes that occurred after the PIRLS 2021 data were collected. Nevertheless, readers should be aware that the 2021-2022 school year did not entail any widespread closure of schools in Ireland – although a requirement for primary school pupils in Third Class and above to wear masks was introduced, for the first time, in December 2021, in response to a new wave of virus infections. In February 2022, the requirement for face masks to be worn in schools and other settings (e.g., public transport) was lifted, as was the requirement for social distancing measures such as bubbles and pods in schools. This ushered in a widespread revival of social and behavioural norms from before the pandemic.

To what extent can PIRLS data tell us about the impacts of policy decisions?

The PIRLS 2021 cohort experienced most of their primary education during the lifetime of the high-profile and multi-stranded *2011 National Strategy*, received instruction in language and reading through the PLC, and lived through the unprecedented educational turmoil caused by COVID-19 in the period immediately preceding PIRLS data collection. It seems likely, not to say inevitable, that their approaches to reading and their responses to contextual questions bear traces of these various experiences. Nevertheless, data from PIRLS – a cross-sectional study collecting “snapshot” data at a particular moment – cannot be used to prove conclusively that any specific policy or practice has caused a change in reading achievement or in response patterns on questionnaires (see, for example, Rutkowski & Delandshere, 2016, on the limitations of using large scale assessment data to make causal inferences).

Can we, then, draw any links at all between policy decisions and PIRLS outcomes? We can, at best, *suggest* some causal links that *seem plausible* based on existing information – provided that researchers and readers share an understanding that any such connections drawn are suppositions, or “best guesses”, not proven fact. For example, it *seems reasonable to surmise* that the additional time spent on literacy instruction between 2011 and 2016 may have been a factor in the improved mean reading performance observed in PIRLS 2016 – but we cannot know this for sure. Similarly, it *seems logical* that any changes to teachers’ practices during reading instruction between 2016 and 2021 may have been influenced by the PLC – but we cannot conclude this definitively.

The complex and intersecting nature of the various policy strands under consideration mean that it is challenging even to generate such tentative causal hypotheses or suppositions. Additional time spent on literacy instruction between 2011 and 2016 could have had an impact on Ireland’s improved performance – but so could many other factors, including (but not limited to) other actions under the *2011 National Strategy*, such as increased provision of literacy-specific professional development for teachers, the introduction of mandatory standardised

testing in reading, the requirement for schools to conduct SSE with a focus on literacy, etc. The *2011 National Strategy*, in this sense, can be viewed as a highly complex policy intervention featuring multiple (and probably interacting) components; thus, it is difficult to theorise about which components, if any, have been effective (see Gilleece & Clerkin, 2024, on the evaluation of complex interventions in the Irish education system). Similarly, changes to teachers' practices during reading instruction between 2016 and 2021 may have been influenced by the PLC – but they may also have been influenced by the unusual circumstances created by the COVID-19 lockdowns, which themselves interrupted the anticipated rollout of support for the PLC, as well as other factors.

With all this in mind, the act of interpreting data from a study like PIRLS 2021 in relation to the policy context must, inevitably, be tentative and subjective. Nevertheless, the data presented in this report offer some initial clues as to how the unique policy context in which the PIRLS 2021 cohort were educated may have affected them. Importantly, these findings can also point towards possible avenues for future research and policy initiatives. As Ireland's new *Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy* has recently been published (Department of Education, 2024b), this seems an opportune time to reflect on areas that may merit further investigation and/or emphasis.

Research questions

In light of this review of the relevant policy context, and considering all caveats associated with PIRLS 2021 data, four research questions underpin this report:

- 1) Which pupil, home, class, teacher, and school characteristics are related to Fifth Class pupils' reading achievement in Ireland? Do these relationships among pupils in Ireland differ from the corresponding ones among their peers in a set of selected reference countries and across all PIRLS participating countries as a whole? To what extent have these relationships among pupils in Ireland changed, if at all, across the PIRLS cycles? (*Chapters 3 – 5*)
- 2) What are the characteristics of low-, medium-, and high-achieving Fifth Class pupils in reading in Ireland? (*Chapter 6*)
- 3) Do Fifth Class pupils' wellbeing, school-related experiences, and reading attitudes and behaviours vary by their gender, country of birth, socioeconomic status, and school DEIS status in Ireland? (*Chapter 7*)
- 4) What were the educational experiences of Fifth Class pupils during the COVID-19 pandemic? (*Chapter 8*)

In Chapter 9, key themes and potential policy implications arising from the findings are identified and discussed.