



Northern Ireland
Assembly

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Caroline Perry

Attainment targets and the influence of socio-economic background on outcomes

Summary

Internationally, socio-economic background is a strong predictor of educational success, with the difference in outcomes between advantaged and disadvantaged students equivalent to more than two years of schooling.

In the UK and the Republic of Ireland this link is average in comparison to other countries. However, in countries such as Australia, Canada, Finland, Japan and Korea a student's socio-economic background has less bearing on their educational outcomes.

Table 1 illustrates the types of attainment targets/ indicators used at a departmental level in each of the jurisdictions. It shows that only Northern Ireland and Wales employ specific attainment targets at GCSE and A level, while the Republic of Ireland uses a target to improve performance in the PISA study.¹ England and Scotland instead use attainment indicators to monitor progress.

¹ The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) assesses student performance at age 15

Table 1: Educational targets or indicators used at a departmental level in each jurisdiction at post-primary

Jurisdiction	Targets/ indicators used
Northern Ireland	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Series of targets to raise the proportion of pupils achieving particular numbers of and grades in GCSEs and A levels • Targets for all pupils, children with FSME and looked after children
England	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No specific attainment targets • Instead a series of indicators are used to monitor progress for all pupils and children with FSME at GCSE and A level
Republic of Ireland	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Targets relate to improving performance within the PISA study to specified levels
Scotland	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No specific attainment targets • Performance in PISA used as an indicator for monitoring progress
Wales	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A target to improve performance of pupils with FSME to a specific level • In addition, indicators used are Key Stage 4 outcomes, including according to levels of deprivation, as well as PISA ranking

1 Introduction

The *Programme for Government 2011-15* includes a number of educational targets relating to attainment at GCSE and A level. This paper highlights the post-primary attainment targets in place here and in England, the Republic of Ireland, Scotland and Wales. It also explores briefly the relationship between socio-economic background and educational performance in a number of countries internationally.

2 Attainment targets

Northern Ireland

The Department's Business Plan contains a series of attainment targets relating to GCSE and A level. Two of these are included within the *Programme for Government 2011-15* (PfG). The targets are outlined in the table overleaf.²

² Department of Education Business Plan 2014/15

Table 2: Department of Education attainment targets

	Commitment	Milestones/ outputs	
		2013/14	2014/15
Overall school population	Increase the overall % of young people who achieve at least 5 GCSEs at A* - C (or equivalent) including English and Maths by the time they leave school (also in PfG)	63%	66%
	Increase % of school leavers with at least 2 A levels at grades A*-E (or equivalent)	55.2%	56%
	Increase % of school leavers with at least 3 A levels at A*-C (or equivalent)	Increase to at least 35%	
Pupils with FSME	Increase % of FSME pupils attaining 5 or more GCSEs at A*-C (or equivalent) including English and Maths (also in PfG)	45%	49%
	Increase % of FSME school leavers with at least 2 A levels at grades A*-E (or equivalent)	29.5%	30.5%
	Increase % of FSME school leavers with at least 3 A levels at grades A*-C (or equivalent)	17.2%	18%
Looked after children	Increase % of looked after children leaving school with at least 5 GCSEs at grades A*-C (or equivalent) including English and Maths	Increase above the 2011/12 position of 19.1%	

England

The Coalition: Our Programme for Government outlines the actions to be taken over the period, but does not include specific educational attainment targets.³ The Department for Education's business plan reflects these outcomes and sets out some educational indicators. At Key Stage 4 and Post-16 these are as follows:⁴

- Percentage of pupils achieving A* - C GCSE in English and maths at age 16;
- Percentage of young people who have attained a full Level 3 qualification by 19;

³ HM Government (2010) *The Coalition: Our Programme for Government* London: Cabinet Office

⁴ Department for Education (2012) *Business Plan 2012-2015*

- Percentage of young people who have not attained a Level 2 qualification in English and maths at age 16, who go on to attain Level 2 or higher qualification in both by the end of the year;
- The percentage of children with FSME progressing to 1) Oxford or Cambridge; 2) Russell Group; 3) all universities;
- Participation of 16 and 19 year olds in education;
- Number of schools achieving new “basics” measure at GCSE (most deprived schools and least deprived schools, and the gap between them).

Republic of Ireland

Towards Recovery: Programme for a National Government 2011-2016 includes a series of over-arching educational aims. It does not detail specific educational attainment targets other than an aim to position Ireland within the top ten performing countries in PISA.⁵ In addition, the *Department of Education and Skills Statement of Strategy* sets out a number of objectives; the attainment targets included are as follows:⁶

- Increase the percentage of 15-year old students performing at or above Level 4 (i.e. at the highest levels) in PISA reading literacy and numeracy tests by at least five percentage points by 2020;
- Halve the percentage of 15-year old students performing at or below Level 1 (the lowest level) in PISA reading literacy and numeracy tests by 2020.

Scotland

Programme for Scotland 2013-14 – Empowering Scotland sets out aims and actions around education for the period, but does not include specific attainment targets.⁷ The Government also has 16 National Outcomes which set out its aims over a ten year period; 50 indicators track progress towards achieving the aims. One of these relates to educational attainment, measuring the gap in performance in PISA between Scotland and the OECD average.⁸

Wales

The Welsh Government's *Programme for Government* does not include specific attainment targets, although it includes an indicator monitoring the differences in Key

⁵ Fine Gael, Labour Party (2011) *Towards Recovery: Programme for a National Government 2011-2016* Dublin: Fine Gael; Labour Party

⁶ Department of Education and Skills *Statement of Strategy 2011-14* Dublin: DES

⁷ The Scottish Government (2013) *Programme for Scotland 2013-14 – Empowering Scotland* [online] Available at: <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2013/09/8177>

⁸ The Scottish Government (2013) *Improve levels of educational attainment* [online] Available at: <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/About/Performance/scotPerforms/indicator/attainment>

Stage 4 outcomes according to levels of deprivation, an indicator on Key Stage 4 outcomes overall and PISA ranking.⁹

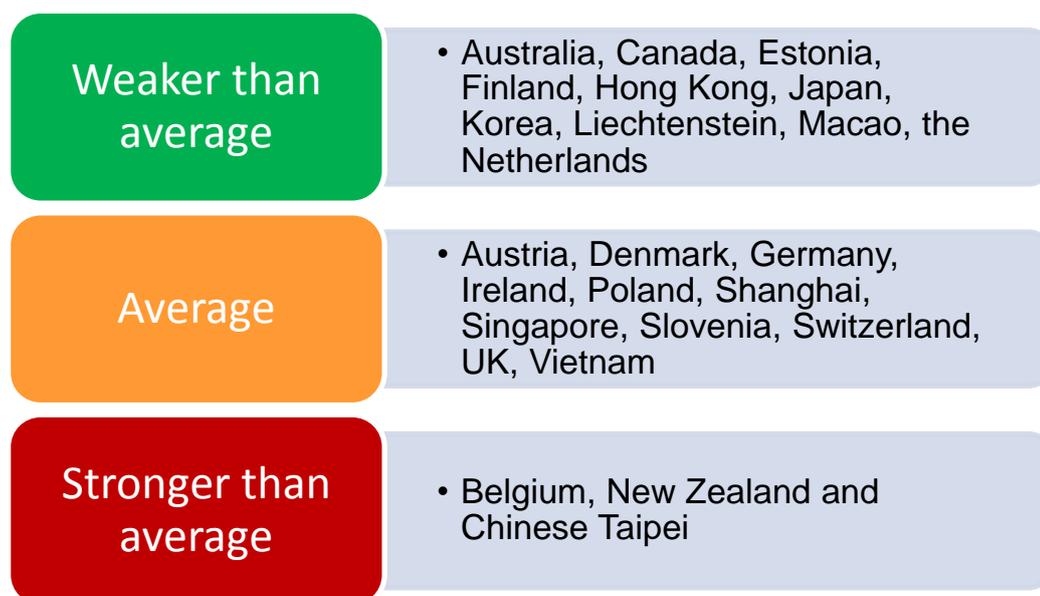
The Government's *Tackling Poverty Programme* includes a target to increase the proportion of pupils with FSME achieving five GCSEs at grades A*-C to 37% by 2017.¹⁰

3 Success of education systems in addressing underachievement

Socio-economic background is a strong predictor of educational outcomes. Internationally, the performance difference between advantaged and disadvantaged students is equivalent to more than two years of schooling.¹¹

However, evidence from the PISA 2012 study highlights countries where the link between disadvantage and poorer educational outcomes is weaker than average (i.e. a student's disadvantaged background has less impact on their performance).¹²

Figure 1: Strength of the relationship between mathematics performance and socio-economic status internationally¹³



Research internationally indicates that the most successful education systems combine equity with quality in education. Equity in education means that pupils achieve their level of potential without being disadvantaged by their background or circumstances.¹⁴

⁹ Welsh Government (2011) *Programme for Government*

¹⁰ Welsh Government (2014) *Building resilient communities; Taking forward the Tackling Poverty Action Plan Annual Report 2014*

¹¹ OECD (2013) *PISA 2012 Results: Excellence Through Equity: Giving every student the chance to succeed (Volume II)* OECD Publishing

¹² As above

¹³ OECD (2012) *Equity and Quality in Education: Supporting Disadvantaged Students and Schools* OECD Publishing

¹⁴ OECD (2012) *Equity and Quality in Education: Supporting Disadvantaged Students and Schools* OECD Publishing