

# Written Ministerial Statement

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## Department of Education

### STATUTORY KEY STAGE ASSESSMENT ARRANGEMENTS FOR THE THREE-YEAR PERIOD 2025-26 TO 2027-28

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**Mr Givan (The Minister of Education):** I am pleased to inform Members of the Assembly of the interim arrangements for statutory Key Stage assessment in Northern Ireland for the three-year period from the 2025-26 academic year. This is a key commitment within my Department's Education Strategy, TransformED NI.

These arrangements have been developed in consultation with the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) and key stakeholders, including school leaders.

Northern Ireland is currently without any national measures of system performance in the core skills of literacy and numeracy at primary school or at Key Stage 3. This is not acceptable and makes Northern Ireland an outlier internationally in being without basic performance data.

System-level sample assessments are large-scale evaluations of student performance conducted at the national level. These assessments are designed to measure the effectiveness of education systems without evaluating individual students or schools directly. Instead, they gather data from a representative sample of students to draw conclusions about overall educational quality, performance trends and educational policies.

Such system-level sample assessments are used wisely across many high-performing education systems including Canada, USA, Finland, Japan and Singapore.

There is a clear and pressing need to establish as soon as possible how our system is performing in literacy and numeracy, particularly post COVID. Literacy and numeracy are the essential foundation of all education. It is a central purpose of our schools, supported by parents, to ensure that pupils develop the necessary literacy and numeracy skills to succeed at school and later, in life and at work.

It is essential that, after seven years of primary education, children have developed a firm foundation in these skills and that, after twelve years of compulsory education, young people leave school competent in reading, writing and in using mathematics.

Consequently, from the 2025-26 academic year, there will be a system level check in literacy and numeracy via written assessments designed and administered by CCEA.

The assessments will be conducted among a representative sample of pupils in their final year of Key Stages 1, 2 and 3 ensuring we gather reliable data on attainment. Pupils will sit the first assessments in early March 2026. Outcomes will **not** be used for individual school performance measurement nor published at pupil or school level.

This new approach is designed to provide a clear, evidence-based understanding of how well our pupils are developing essential skills in reading, writing and mathematics. Participation in the system level check will be a legal requirement for selected schools being specified in the Assessment Documentation produced under The Education (Levels of Progression for Key Stages 1, 2 and 3) Order (Northern Ireland) 2012.

The key purpose of the assessments is to measure national educational performance. They will allow us to identify trends, strengths and areas for improvement within our education system. This approach will allow robust measurement of standards over time enabling a much more authoritative picture to

be established on our national educational performance than is currently possible. The insights gained will play a vital role in shaping policies and interventions that support high-quality teaching and learning for all children in Northern Ireland.

The end of key stage sample tests will have higher levels of reliability, validity and comparability than any check based on differing assessment tasks. This approach also minimises bureaucracy and workload for school leaders and teachers.

The assessments will be very low stakes at pupil and school level meaning there will be no pressure on schools to engage in test preparation. Pupils are familiar with taking part in such low stakes assessments, for example, schools carry out their own standardised tests in literacy and numeracy annually.

It is envisaged that the assessments will provide data on the:

- Percentage of children performing at the expected level in literacy and numeracy at end of Key Stages 1-3
- Percentage of children performing above the expected level in literacy and numeracy at end of Key Stages 1-3
- Outcomes for specific groups of pupils such as those entitled to Free School Meals.
- Literacy outcomes can be disaggregated into reading and writing.
- Numeracy outcomes can be disaggregated into number, shape and space, data handling and measures.
- Strengths and weaknesses at system and sub-group level to inform the development of additional resources and Teacher Professional Learning.

These proposals provide a consistent and reliable approach to Key Stage assessment while a longer-term review of assessment arrangements in Northern Ireland is carried out. The interim arrangements will remain in place until the 2027-2028 academic year.

My Department and CCEA will work closely with schools, teachers and stakeholders to ensure that the process is constructive and well-communicated and to ensure a smooth implementation of the new arrangements. Further details, including timelines and guidance for schools will be provided in coming months.

In the longer-term, we must establish high common attainment standards for pupils in Northern Ireland, with very clearly defined learning outcomes that we expect children to meet at key stages in their education. This will make it easier for teachers to assess progress and identify areas needing improvement. It will also allow parents to have a clearer understanding of learning expectations and better support their children's progress.

I will keep the Assembly updated on progress and any further developments in this important area.