

Reading as a Right

a path to literacy in the 21st Century



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Labour

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Introduction

One in ten Irish children has serious difficulty with reading and writing, or almost 50,000 primary school pupils. This rises to as many as one in three children in some disadvantaged schools. At second level, 17 per cent of fifteen year-olds – and as many as one in four teenage boys – do not have the literacy skills necessary to function in today's knowledge-intensive society.

Literacy is the key that unlocks a child's education; the means of exercising our rights as citizens; and an enabler of full participation in society. It is the most basic, and the most important, life skill that our schools teach. No child should leave an Irish school without being able to read and write. Yet, every year, thousands do.

Every young person who leaves school unable to read and write represents a failure of our education system. Inadequate literacy is a key driver of early school leaving. It has a permanent scarring effect on life prospects: young people with poor literacy levels are more likely to be early school leavers, who in turn are more likely to experience poverty, to work for low pay or be unemployed, to be young parents and to encounter the criminal justice system.

However, inadequate literacy across a population can also act as a potential drag on economic growth. Historically high levels of literacy contributed to Ireland's productivity leap between 1980 and 2001. Our educational advantage is now being undermined by developing economies that are seeking to close that gap.

Irish society, our workplaces and our economy have changed radically since 1980, yet overall child literacy rates are the same today as they were then. Class sizes are smaller. In 1980, almost 80 per cent of primary school pupils were in classes of 30 or more, falling to less than 22 per cent by 2009, and the curriculum has been overhauled and modernised. Yet the class of 2011 is the first generation of Irish people not to have a better standard of literacy than that of their parents.

1980 standards of literacy are not sufficient to ensure that all of our citizens are equipped with the skills necessary for the 21st century world of work, in every sector and at every level. Irish students at every level of literacy need to perform better if they are to be available for the kinds of knowledge-intensive work Ireland is trying to attract and grow. Unless we close this gap, every year tens of thousands of people will be excluded permanently from sustainable employment and Ireland's historical advantage of a well-educated population will be permanently eroded.

The greatest scope for improving literacy is among educationally disadvantaged children, who are up to four times more likely to score in the lowest 20 per cent of literacy ability. Areas of concentrated educational

disadvantage require a concentrated effort in order to address literacy in the home and in the community, as well as in school. However, educational disadvantage is to be found in every part of Ireland. If we are to be sure of bringing up standards across the board, we need to maximise the most important resource we have in tackling poor literacy: teachers teaching literacy well.

Improving literacy does not require new technology, new infrastructure or very large sums of money. We have the ingredients for success already: a teacher in every classroom and the means to develop literacy-rich communities through local authorities and existing community initiatives. The final ingredient must be a national passion for literacy and a determination that, with a joined-up, evidence-based approach, every child in Ireland will leave school with the literacy skills they need for the modern world.

Executive Summary

Make literacy a national priority

- Develop, as an urgent national priority, **a national strategy plan to improve overall youth literacy levels**, with agreed national outcomes and specific targets for disadvantaged children and young people, as recommended by the NESF report *Child Literacy and Social Inclusion: Implementation Issues*.
- Build on the existing Early Childhood Care and Education Scheme to provide **a comprehensive, regularised and universal pre-school year**, with an emphasis on clear developmental goals for pre-school children.
- **Change the Education Act** so that the National Educational Welfare Board can address absenteeism from the time a child registers for school, rather than from the age of six.
- **Provide dedicated funding to stock school libraries.** €9m would purchase about one library book per primary and second level pupil.

Primary Education

- Responsibility for achieving the objectives of this national strategy will be devolved to schools. Every primary school must develop **a whole-school literacy plan, with target outcomes for class groups corresponding with national objectives.**
- **Responsibility for achieving these outcomes will be vested in the school principal.**
- Each DEIS school will have access to **an experienced literacy mentor** charged with the professional development of staff.
- In tandem with improved teaching practice, all non-DEIS primary schools will be mandated to devote a minimum of **90 minutes of class time to literacy instruction per day**, across the curriculum. **DEIS schools** would be required to teach literacy across the curriculum for **120-180 minutes per day**. If schools are not delivering improved literacy results, consideration will be given to extending the primary school day by half an hour in those schools, to allow for an extension of the time available for teaching literacy.
- **Reach out to families.** Labour's area-based approach to child poverty will incorporate family literacy and community literacy projects, according to best practice. Whole-school literacy plans will be required to incorporate more regular and structured feedback to parents about their child's literacy standard, as it compares nationally, and as it compares with their fellow pupils.

Second Level Education

- **Every school will draw up a literacy plan** based on its assessment of pupils at first and third year, with targets for improvement that correspond with national objectives.
- **Responsibility for improving literacy in the school will be vested in the principal.**
- **Pre-service and in-service for all second level teachers will include instruction on the teaching of literacy** across the curriculum.
- Professional development for teachers in DEIS schools will be prioritised, where **it will be required that literacy instruction be integrated into subject classes.**

Adopt a whole child approach

- **Target literacy black spots through an area-based response to literacy.** Along the model of *youngballymun*, this will involve coordinated intervention by public health officials, teachers and schools, local authorities, and non-governmental organisations to address whole-community literacy.
- **Work with local authorities to implement Labour's 'Right to Read' policies,** including minimum size guidelines for social housing, longer opening hours for libraries, and supporting library outreach policies, such as study zones and the 'Baby Books Bundle' to encourage new parents to read to their baby.

What is the problem?

1. Too many children without adequate literacy skills

Literacy standards among Irish children are, at best, stagnating and at worst they are declining considerably. Despite smaller class sizes and increased resources, overall literacy standards among primary school pupils have not improved since 1980. More worryingly still, it seems that literacy standards of Irish teenagers are declining, having ranked 5th in the OECD for literacy in 2006, but only 17th out of 34 OECD countries in 2009.

There is no national monitoring of literacy in second level schools. The only standard data available to us is the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), which assesses literacy capacity among 15 year olds in OECD countries.

According to the most recent OECD PISA results in 2009, 17 per cent of Irish 15 year olds scored at Level 1 or below, a level at which students are deemed not to have reached the minimum level of literacy required for pursuing further study or meeting the demands of today's workplace.¹ For teenage boys, this figure rises to one in four.

Children and teenagers who are educationally disadvantaged are at particular risk of illiteracy or poor literacy. One in ten primary school children has severe literacy difficulties, rising to one in three children in disadvantaged primary schools. A 2005 examination of disadvantaged schools by the Department of Education also found that 43 per cent of their pupils fell into the bottom 20 per cent of pupils nationally for reading ability.

However, educational disadvantage is not confined to designated disadvantaged schools. In fact, these schools only account for approximately 40 per cent of pupils at risk of educational disadvantage, which makes a national approach to improving literacy all the more urgent.

2. No national requirement that pupils reach an agreed standard of literacy

The PISA 2009 results indicate that being able to read and write to a level that allows full engagement with the world of work is not a prerequisite for passing Junior Certificate English.

If we map the findings of PISA 2009 onto the Junior Cert class of 2009, of the 54,862 exam candidates that year, around 6,000 pupils scored at Level 1 in PISA yet only 2,074 sat Foundation Level Junior Cert English and 243 failed the exam at Ordinary Level. This suggests that almost 3,300 students passed Ordinary Level English despite a lack of basic literacy skills.

¹ See Appendix A for a note on the Department of Education's response to PISA 2009

While second level schools and teachers will be aware of the literacy standard of their pupils, through school-level literacy testing and classroom practice, **there is no national standard which schools are expected to meet, other than that of the official state examinations.**

Hence, the figures above suggest that Irish pupils are able to progress through the school system, at least as far as the Junior Certificate, without reaching baseline proficiency in literacy.

3. The cost of failure is too high

Pupils with inadequate literacy are more likely to leave school early, which in turn makes them more likely to experience long-term unemployment, poverty, poor health, and to end up in prison. The personal cost of illiteracy is isolation, poverty and disenfranchisement. The societal cost, and cost to the economy as a whole, is profound. A study of the value of investment in literacy in the UK found that a specific reading intervention at age six would result in estimated savings to the British Exchequer of between £1.37 and £1.62 billion. While comparable figures are not available for Ireland, this research points to a significant return on early investment in child literacy.

What is the current response?

1. No coherent strategy or lines of accountability

The Government has adopted national child literacy targets, including a pledge to reduce the number of disadvantaged primary school pupils with serious literacy difficulties from 27-30 per cent to less than 15 per cent by 2016, and a pledge in *Towards 2016* that 'every child should leave primary school literate and numerate'. However, it does not have a national strategy for achieving these targets, other than the stated aims of the primary level English curriculum.

The DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) Action Plan 2005-2010 does stipulate that designated DEIS schools must have individual three-year action plans with targets for literacy and numeracy achievement. Additional literacy-related supports are available to DEIS schools for this purpose. However, individual school-level targets are not required to have any reference to the national target. As a result, **there is no accountability for meeting this national target for disadvantaged schools, or for improving the literacy skills of pupils nationwide.**

A 'Draft National Plan to Improve Literacy and Numeracy in Schools' was published in November 2010, to coincide with the publication of a report on the teaching and learning of English and Maths at primary level by the Inspectorate, which found that learning outcomes for English were 'unsatisfactory' in 14.5 per cent of lessons observed, and that almost one in three teachers had no lesson plan for English lessons. However this is a 'draft' plan for consultation with stakeholders, and is not government policy.

2. Too great an emphasis on specific interventions, rather than improving daily teaching of literacy.

Non-DEIS schools rely on the knowledge of teachers gained in their undergraduate teacher training, the school curriculum, continuing professional development for staff, access to special educational needs teachers, and school-specific initiatives to teach literacy. DEIS schools have access to literacy and numeracy coordinators, training, and extra resources, while the most disadvantaged (Band 1) schools have a Reading Recovery teacher, trained in the early intervention, one-on-one tutoring programme.

The withdrawal of pupils with particular literacy difficulties for specialised tutoring has an important role in education. However, it requires a dedicated member of staff and is extremely time and resource-intensive. It is not sufficient alone to raise reading standards overall. Rather, both international and national research, the latter conducted in Irish primary schools by Dr Eithne Kennedy of St Patrick's College, points to more effective daily

instruction of literacy in the classroom as being key to improving literacy among all pupils, including those with serious difficulties.

Classroom teachers are our most important resource in tackling poor literacy. As international literacy expert Tim Shanahan notes: “Energetic, intelligent high-quality teaching remains the best solution to our literacy problems...Good teaching results in sound learning.” **However, evidence from the Educational Research Centre and other experts suggests that Irish primary school teachers do not get sufficient pre-service training in the teaching of literacy, while second level teachers are not required to undertake any.** Furthermore, a large minority of teachers in disadvantaged primary schools have reported that existing in-career development on the teaching and learning of literacy was of little use.

DEIS second level schools are required to have a ‘whole school’ approach to literacy. However, as noted above, second level teachers are not required to learn how to teach literacy as part of their training. Pupils with severe literacy difficulties receive one-on-one tutoring. Anecdotal evidence suggests, however, that the most successful second level DEIS schools have adopted a policy whereby every teacher has a role in improving literacy.

3. Lack of political will

The Programme for Government 2007-2012 stated Government policy as it stood in 2007, namely the introduction of standardised literacy and numeracy testing twice over a primary school education; and intensive reading and maths programmes for children in disadvantaged schools. It also stated that the Government would ‘provide increased funding for school libraries and greatly improve the level of support provided for book loan schemes.’ **However, by 2009, the Renewed Programme for Government contained no reference to child literacy.**

What are the solutions?

1. Make literacy a national priority

- Develop, as an urgent national priority, **a national strategy plan to improve overall youth literacy levels, with agreed national outcomes and specific targets for disadvantaged children and teenagers**, as recommended by the NESF report *Child Literacy and Social Inclusion: Implementation Issues*.
- Build on the existing Early Childhood Care and Education Scheme to provide **a comprehensive, regularised and universal pre-school year**, with an emphasis on clear developmental goals for pre-school children.
- **Change the Education (Welfare) Act 2000** so that the National Educational Welfare Board can address absenteeism from the time a child registers for school, rather than from the age of six.
- **Provide dedicated funding to stock school libraries.** €9m would purchase about one library book per primary and second level pupil.

2. A 'whole child' response

While research shows that the quality of literacy instruction in school is critical, a child's literacy is also a product of their family home and their community. A sustainable improvement in literacy must be underpinned by a 'whole child' approach, which also looks at a child's influences outside of the classroom.

This is particularly relevant in disadvantaged areas, where poor parental experiences of school, low levels of literacy among parents, low expectations for educational achievement, and a literacy-poor home and community environment all contribute to lower levels of child and adolescent literacy.

Other than the small-scale family literacy projects attached to a small number of DEIS schools since 2009, the approach to the home and community literacy environment has largely been ad hoc, and reliant on initiatives by the community and voluntary sector, and local authorities.

What we will do:

- **Target literacy black spots** through an area-based response to literacy. Along with the model of *youngballymun*, this will involve coordinated intervention by public health officials, teachers and schools, local authorities, and non-governmental organisations to address whole-community literacy.
- **Provide for literacy summer camps in disadvantaged areas** to minimise the 'summer slump' experienced by primary school pupils.
- **Establish minimum size guidelines for social housing** in accordance with the Labour Party's 'Right to Read' campaign.

- **Work with local authorities to implement Labour’s ‘Right to Read’ policies**, including longer opening hours for libraries, and supporting library outreach policies, such as study zones and the ‘Baby Books Bundle’ to encourage new parents to read to their baby.

3. Primary Education

- **Prioritise literacy across the whole school**, not just the classroom. This means that:
 - Every primary school must develop a whole-school literacy plan, with target outcomes for class groups. Schools will be given guidelines so that their target outcomes correspond with national objectives.
 - That plan will include the sharing of literacy assessment data at school level at least twice a year.
 - Ultimate responsibility for literacy outcomes in the school will be vested in school principals. School principals will be required to participate in professional development to improve their own understanding and teaching of literacy, in order to enable them fully to support their teaching staff.

- **Focus on teaching.** Along with school principals, classroom teachers will be the most important drivers of improvement in overall literacy. However, they need more support. This includes:
 - Instructing teacher training colleges to increase pre-service instruction on literacy teaching and learning.
 - Establish an advisory group of international and Irish literacy experts to provide evidence-based training for providers of pre-service training, continuous professional development, and dedicated literacy mentors. Specialist material would also be made available online for all teachers and principals.
 - Making continuous professional development in the teaching of literacy a priority for the Teaching Council and the Primary Professional Development Service.
 - Each DEIS school to have access to an experienced literacy mentor charged with the professional development of staff. These mentors would focus on capacity development among the teaching team, and would themselves be obliged to undergo continuous professional development to ensure progress continues to be made in literacy standards.
 - Provide English language support teachers based on the needs of the school population, with greater freedom given to principals to maximise this resource.

- **Time on task.** Research by the Educational Research Centre in 2003 found that disadvantaged primary schools were spending an hour per day on English, but that only 16-20 minutes of this was devoted to reading instruction. Expert evidence shows that the time spent on instruction in literacy is critical, particularly for educationally disadvantaged children.

- In tandem with improved teaching practice, DEIS primary schools would be mandated to provide literacy instruction across the curriculum for 120-180 minutes per day. Non-DEIS schools would be mandated to provide literacy instruction for a minimum of 90 minutes. If schools are not delivering measurable improvements in literacy, consideration will be given to extending the school day in these schools by half an hour to allow for more time on literacy tuition.
 - This time would be divided equally between developing word knowledge, oral fluency, reading comprehension and writing. It is not required that this be a discrete block in the day; rather, schools would have discretion about how this specific literacy instruction was delivered, provided the goals and time and task were achieved. Incorporating specific literacy instruction into other subject areas will minimise the effect of expanding time spent improving reading and writing on the delivery of the rest of the primary school curriculum.
 - We will review the primary school curriculum to optimise the teaching of literacy.
- **Reach out to families.** Family literacy is a key determinant of child literacy. Currently there are only 19 family literacy projects attached to DEIS schools, at a cost of €200,000. A more comprehensive approach to connecting school-based intervention, and the support available to a child at home, would improve the effectiveness of over €210 million being spent annually on educational disadvantage.
 - School literacy plans will require schools to be more proactive in demonstrating how parents can support their child's literacy. The plans will also incorporate more regular feedback to parents, both verbally and in writing, about their child's progress in literacy, both as it compares nationally and as it compares to their classmates. These plans will also provide for support by teachers for parents to develop their child's vocabulary, oral fluency, reading comprehension and writing.
 - Labour's area-based approach to child poverty will incorporate family literacy and community literacy projects, according to best practice.

4. Second Level Education

The low priority afforded to teenage literacy can be gauged by the lack of information we have about it. There is no national standardised testing of literacy at second level. Some schools will test students' literacy upon their entry to first year, but this is for the school's own information only. The PISA process tests the "understanding, using and reflecting on written texts, in

order to achieve one's goals, to develop one's knowledge and potential and to participate in society"; it does not specifically test the ability to read and write.

While it is more difficult, both for the pupil and the school, to address serious literacy difficulties at second level, the needs of the one in eight Irish fifteen year-olds who do not have adequate literacy skills for modern life cannot be ignored.

Second level subjects can demand specific literacy skills, for example, analysing historical sources, decoding verbal mathematical problems or understanding scientific terms. Appropriate teaching of reading comprehension and writing strategies can enhance students' understanding and performance in their subjects, as well as their literacy skills.

Our programme for improving teenage literacy:

- **Get an accurate picture of literacy levels at second level.** Expand the scope of PISA to include a wider sample of 15 year olds, and use the results to inform literacy policy across second level.
- **Every school will draw up a literacy plan** based on its assessment of pupils at first and third year, with targets for improvement that correspond with national objectives.
- **Responsibility for literacy outcomes will be vested in the school principal**, who will also receive professional training to support the implementation of the literacy plan.
- **Panels of subject teachers will be established to provide expert advice** on the best models of teaching subject-specific literacy.
- **Incorporate instruction on the teaching of literacy into pre-service training** for second level teachers. In-service for all second level teachers will also include subject-specific instruction on how to incorporate literacy teaching into the curriculum.
- Professional development of literacy instruction skills will be prioritised for teachers working in DEIS schools, where **literacy instruction will be required to be integrated into subject classes.**
- **Maintain the Junior Certificate Schools Programme (JCSP) demonstration library project** operating in the 30 most disadvantaged DEIS second level schools.

Conclusion

The thirty year stasis in overall child literacy rates demonstrates the need for a radical shift in policy, and specifically in the way we approach the teaching and learning of literacy. While acknowledging the importance of parents in advancing children's literacy, ensuring that every child can read and write to the best of his or her ability, in order to benefit from their wider education, should be the first objective of the Irish school system.

Not only is it morally unacceptable to abandon up to 17 per cent of our young people to a lifetime of underachievement, social exclusion and low pay caused by poor literacy – it does not make economic sense either. We cannot afford to have one in six members of our labour force without the most basic skills necessary for work in the 21st century.

Raising literacy standards is an urgent national priority, and it will be at the heart of a Labour government's strategy for education.

APPENDIX A – The Department of Education’s response to PISA 2009

National and international experts, commissioned by the Department of Education, have cautioned against equating Ireland’s dramatic decline in the 2009 PISA with a directly proportionate decline in ‘actual standards in literacy and numeracy’. It should also be noted that the OECD does not accept the criticisms levelled at PISA by the experts commissioned by the department, but has accepted that ‘performance changes [in PISA] are associated with a fairly large standard error.’²

However, the analysis presented by the Education Research Centre to explain why PISA 2009 might over-estimate the decline in literacy and numeracy standards itself poses some worrying questions about educational standards in Ireland. For example:

- 25 per cent of the decline in reading scores is attributed to the presence of eight low-performing schools in the random, anonymous selection of participating schools.³ If eight schools can produce such a dramatic lowering of the national mean in literacy achievement, exactly how poor are literacy standards in these schools? This should be a matter of urgent and grave concern by the Department of Education.
- Better retention of potential early school leavers is also cited as contributing to a lower literacy score, compared to the PISA 2000 cycle.⁴ However, this simply means that the failure of the Irish education system to improve literacy standards among disadvantaged pupils is being measured more accurately.
- The proportion of students with an immigrant background who participated in PISA testing in Ireland in 2009 rose 6.1 percentage points to 8.3 per cent.⁵ Notwithstanding that one of the best performers in PISA is Canada, with a much more diverse student population than Ireland, the Irish education system is going to have to work harder to close the gap between native speakers, and those for whom English is not their first language. This is still a literacy challenge, not an excuse for a decline in literacy performance.
- Finally, PISA 2009 showed a decline in literacy across all ability levels, and not just among those scoring at Level 1 or below. In fact, Ireland has only half the proportion of high achieving readers (7 per cent) as the best performing countries, New Zealand, Shanghai-China and Singapore. Ireland’s average performance at the top end of the achievement spectrum was also a feature of PISA 2006, indicating that literacy can be improved across the entire school population in Ireland.

² PISA 2009 Information Note, p.11

³ Ibid., Appendix B, B.4

⁴ Ibid., Appendix B, B.2

⁵ Ibid., Appendix B. B.1