

Policy for Equity in Education

A critique of selected developments in 2024

Findings were published in 2024 from a review by the OECD which examined resource allocation to schools to address educational disadvantage, focusing on Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS). National commentary also considered DEIS monitoring and evaluation, noting limitations with data and methods (Gilleece & Clerkin, 2024). Also in 2024, there were several equity-related education policy developments, including *Equal Start: A model to support access and participation in early learning and childcare for all children* (DCEDIY, 2024), *the Traveller and Roma Education Strategy 2024–2030* (Government of Ireland [GoI], 2024a), and *Ireland's Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy 2024–2033* (GoI, 2024b).

In this article, we reflect on some of the OECD findings for DEIS and consider their relevance to other policies. We also consider how some issues raised in the context of DEIS may be addressed by approaches used in related policies.

May 2025 marks the 20th anniversary of the publication of *DEIS: An Action Plan for Educational Inclusion* (Department of Education and Science, 2005). This was updated in 2017 and refined in 2022, when the number of participating schools was further increased (DES, 2017a; DoE, 2022). A key change was the use of the Pobal HP deprivation index to identify schools for DEIS (DoE, 2022). The new *Equal Start* model uses a similar approach to DEIS to identify 'priority settings' for early years – those operating in the context of concentrated disadvantage (DCEDIY, 2024).

One benefit of the HP index is that its use enhances trust and support for the DEIS identification process (OECD, 2024), although the OECD points to an ongoing need for refinement and validation of the social disadvantage indicator(s) used. To support ongoing continuity between approaches used in *Equal Start* and DEIS, we propose that



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Ireland's DEIS policy (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) is approaching the 20th anniversary of its publication. Findings from a recent OECD review will undoubtedly influence its future. This article highlights how some of the issues raised in the review also apply to other policies, and it considers how learning from related policies may usefully inform DEIS.

any future refinement to DEIS identification should consider potential implications for Equal Start, and vice versa.

Equal Start notes that ‘priority setting’ numbers will be updated annually, with designation retained for two years. Settings not meeting the threshold after the two-year cycle will have one year to transition out (DCEDIY, 2024). In contrast, while DEIS has expanded considerably over time, no schools have lost their DEIS status. The need for a more dynamic DEIS resource allocation model is noted by the OECD, which also flags the need for a gradual phasing out of supports for schools where needs have diminished over time. We suggest that the proposed cyclical identification process for *Equal Start* may provide lessons for DEIS in future.

The OECD (2024) notes Ireland’s strong expertise in DEIS monitoring and evaluation but identifies limited use of administrative data and of statistical methods that allow for causal inference; it indicates that opportunities exist to build school capacity in data use. Gilleece and Clerkin (2024) flagged data limitations as a challenge to examining outcomes for subgroups of pupils in Ireland, such as Traveller or Roma students. The *Traveller and Roma Education Strategy* commits to expanding data-collection systems to enable monitoring of attendance patterns for such students (GoI, 2024a). More broadly, it commits to continuing ‘to develop the range of data related to Traveller and Roma education that is collected, analysed and published . . . increasing the range of disaggregated and qualitative data’ (ibid., p.33). Although the strategy emphasises attendance and retention data, it gives less attention to achievement outcomes.

One of the indicators of success in *Ireland’s Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy 2024–2033* (GoI, 2024b) is improved mathematics and reading performance by learners in DEIS schools. While specific targets for achievement in DEIS schools were outlined in earlier policy in this area (DES, 2017b), such targets are no longer included. Nonetheless, the strategy indicates that results from national and international assessments at primary and post-primary levels, and other relevant data, will serve as benchmarks for assessing progress. It seems likely that monitoring the strategy’s progress for learners in DEIS schools may suffer from the types of limitations with data and methods referenced elsewhere (e.g., Gilleece & Clerkin, 2024; OECD, 2024), given, for example, fluctuations in the numbers of DEIS schools participating in different cycles of international studies, the lack of oversampling of DEIS rural schools in national assessments (Nelis & Gilleece, 2023), and the lack of comparability between various primary-level standardised tests (DES, 2016).

In summary, while monitoring and evaluation are embedded in recently published equity-related education policies, limitations with data and methods described in the context of DEIS are likely to apply more widely, despite efforts to improve data availability. As DEIS approaches its 20th anniversary, its future

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direction should be influenced by learning not only from international and national reviews but also from related policies.

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