



Department of
Education
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TransformED NI:

Transforming Teaching and Learning:
A Strategy for Educational Excellence in
Northern Ireland

March 2025

Executive Summary

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Executive Summary

Our education system: opportunities and challenges

Historically, the Northern Ireland education system has had much to celebrate. Our young people perform comparably higher at both GCSE and A Level than their peers across the UK and we have a highly qualified teaching workforce. It also, however, faces significant challenges, including inadequate investment, outdated infrastructure and the long-lasting impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. The rise in numbers of children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) adds to the complexity of the education landscape.

The Independent Review of Education sets out a roadmap for longer-term reform, advocating for progressive changes over two decades. Key recommendations include investing in early years, transforming SEN support, raising the age of compulsory education and training to 18 and improving education support services.

In responding to the Review, Paul Givan, the Minister of Education, has indicated that during the current mandate there will be a renewed focus on the core areas of curriculum, assessment, qualifications, tackling educational disadvantage and school improvement. All of these will be underpinned by greater investment in a coherent approach to Teacher Professional Learning.

These are the key factors that shape high-performing education systems. Yet they have received limited focus or investment during the past decade in Northern Ireland. All need review, evaluation and improvement.

In taking forward the educational reforms outlined in this strategy, it is vital for us to become an evidence-informed system using the best available research, data and evidence to shape the policies, practices and decisions that will govern our education system for the next decade.

So we will:

- Examine how best to establish a research function that will ensure a strong evidence-base for future education policy and practice in Northern Ireland.

The case for change

A well-educated population is vital for Northern Ireland's economic prosperity in order to meet the demands of a rapidly changing job market, fuelled by technological advancements and globalisation. Never has the quality of a country's education system been more important than it is today.

The growing economic power houses of the 21st century are those nations that have placed an absolute premium on getting their education system right. Northern Ireland must do the same.

In developing a reform strategy to deliver educational excellence in Northern Ireland, it is important that we recognise the context of where we are now, openly and transparently.

There are both strengths and weaknesses in educational standards. There are strengths in our national standards with improving outcomes for school leavers over time and notably for children entitled to Free School Meals. Nonetheless, there are concerning differences in performance at GCSE level between schools with similar levels of disadvantage and some schools continue to perform poorly. Critically, there are key limitations to our data. It is not good enough that we do not know how our children are performing in literacy and numeracy at ages 8, 11 or 14.

Northern Ireland's performance in international assessments at primary level is very strong albeit the impact of preparation for the transfer test must be considered. PISA outcomes for 15 year old pupils tell an important story. Northern Ireland's performance can and should be better. As a system our performance has stagnated during the past decade whilst that of England and the Republic of Ireland has improved relative to international comparators.

Currently many other countries in the world are improving their school systems faster than Northern Ireland and have smaller gaps between the achievements of those who are experiencing socio-economic disadvantage and those who are not. We must learn in a sophisticated manner from those countries which outperform us at present.

What makes high-performing systems different?

High-performing education systems are those that achieve **excellence**, **equity** and **efficiency**: world-class levels of performance, for every pupil, at a sustainable cost.

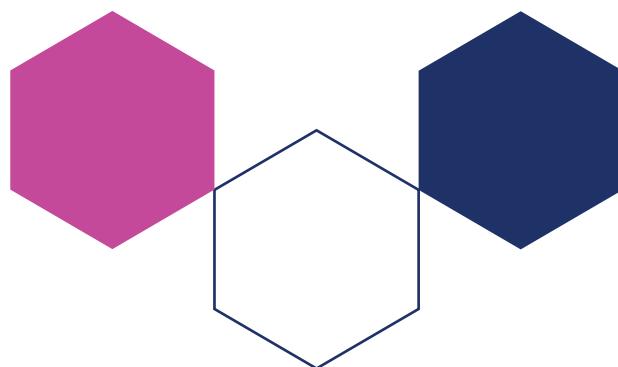
There is no one standard design for a high-performing education system. All systems have their own unique contexts and challenges. There are, however, core elements of excellence identified by education research that are common across high-performing jurisdictions and which can inform the way forward in regard to teaching and learning in Northern Ireland.

Good teachers are the most important feature of a successful education system

The evidence from different education systems around the world shows that the most important factor in determining how well children succeed is the quality of teachers and teaching.

The best education systems in the world recruit top graduates as teachers and prepare them rigorously, focusing on effective classroom practice. They then ensure teachers receive high-quality, ongoing professional development throughout their career.

We are determined to make teaching in Northern Ireland an attractive, high-status profession where every teacher receives world-class professional learning and development.



Recruiting and retaining high quality teachers

High-performing systems do whatever is possible to create a pool of potential teachers that comes from the highest-performing segment of the population. The most successful countries, from the Far East to Scandinavia, are those where teaching has the highest status as a profession, which in turn has a profound impact on who aspires to enter the profession.

Many top-performing education systems have moved towards a relatively smaller number of university colleges for initial teacher education with relatively high entrance standards and high status in the university.

Northern Ireland is extremely fortunate that historically we have recruited high-performing school leavers and graduates to teaching. Teaching has been popular amongst our young people and the profession held in high esteem. We also have a long tradition of high-quality initial teacher education within the university colleges. This is a remarkable platform for our education system and one which mirrors the position in top performing jurisdictions internationally.

Yet in recent years there have been increasing challenges with teacher recruitment and retention, particularly at post-primary level. Subject areas which have particular shortages are mathematics, science subjects (biology, chemistry, physics) and technology and design. There is a clear need to incentivise and attract more top graduates into these key subject areas.

Moving forward, it is important that we put in place better strategic monitoring of teacher supply to anticipate and remediate problems, with improved data on teacher shortages, initial teacher education inflows, retention and teacher vacancy rates.

Student and early career teachers need high-quality support to build the foundation for a successful career. There is a need in Northern Ireland to develop a Core Content Framework that sets out a minimum entitlement during initial teacher education. To ensure an emphasis on subject-specific knowledge and understanding, the framework should be tailored to subject and phase.

Making teacher induction mandatory in Northern Ireland will ensure all teachers receive essential support in the early years of teaching.

So we will:

- Put in place medium and long-term strategic monitoring of teacher supply to anticipate and remediate issues.
- Review how best to attract high-quality graduates to subject shortage areas.
- Develop a Core Content Framework for Initial Teacher Education which is subject and phase specific.
- Make induction a mandatory component of the professional learning journey of our teachers.
- Agree compulsory content and expand the directed learning element of the induction programme to ensure our early career teachers receive comprehensive and structured support.

A strong culture of professional development will raise standards

High-performing systems treat teachers as professionals, investing in high-quality professional learning that supports teachers' development throughout their career. They help teachers refine their practices and stay updated with the latest educational research whilst empowering them in the classroom. Quality professional learning has a greater effect on pupil attainment than other interventions schools may consider.

In Northern Ireland, the Department's Strategy for Teacher Professional Learning – 'Learning Leaders' – was launched in 2016. However, Learning Leaders has suffered from a lack of funding to support implementation and there has not, to date, been a comprehensive approach to professional learning in Northern Ireland.

Investment has been extremely limited. Schools, for example, require earmarked funding to enable them to purchase high-quality professional learning suited to their needs. There has also notably been a lack of subject-specific ongoing professional development to enhance subject-appropriate pedagogy.

Professional development should not be seen as an optional extra; rather it is a central prerequisite to being a professional and effective educator and it is vital that it is adequately resourced and funded.

So we will:

- Refresh the 2016 Learning Leaders Strategy to reflect current challenges and priorities.
- Develop a high-quality professional learning procurement framework for schools to supplement the core offer from Education Authority (EA).
- Provide additional funding for schools to purchase high-quality professional learning to meet their needs.
- Improve access to education research for teachers.
- Pilot investment in supporting groups of schools to create or further embed collaborative professional learning communities working with the research community.
- Pilot investment in the renewal and creation of subject professional learning communities to support subject-specific professional practice.
- Review Baker Days and School Development Days to ensure they are used effectively to support improvement and professional learning.

Effective leaders are key to success

School leadership is crucial to the success of high-performing education systems. Leadership is second only to classroom teaching as an influence on pupil learning. Schools are rarely more effective overall than their leaders.

Providing the right opportunities for leadership development and the right programmes to develop future leaders is crucial to strengthening the education system. In recent years, however, there has not been a qualification for headship to support our newly appointed and aspiring principals nor do we have a support programme for our existing, experienced principals.

The most successful systems make use of or create networks of successful current and former school leaders to visit schools regularly and provide advice

and support. EA already identifies and matches experienced mentors to support newly appointed principals. This can be further extended to build capacity across the education system.

We also know that the quality of middle leadership is fundamental in achieving consistently high standards of teaching and learning. Investing in effective professional learning for middle leaders strengthens the entire education system by ensuring that leadership at all levels is well informed, confident and capable of driving positive change.

So we will:

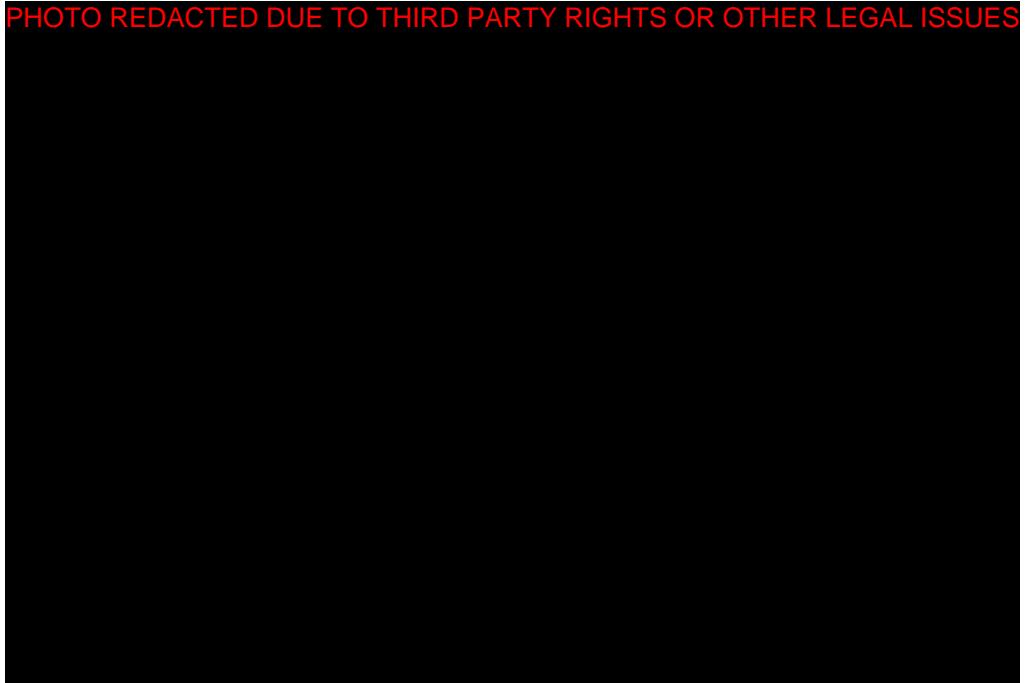
- **Develop a replacement qualification for headship to support our newly appointed and aspiring principals.**
- **Strengthen the provision of school-to-school support through a leaders of education programme.**
- **Develop a professional learning programme for existing, experienced principals.**
- **Review, strengthen and invest in professional learning for middle leaders.**

Design curriculum for coherence and mastery

We need to ensure that the Northern Ireland curriculum remains aligned with international best practice providing a knowledge-rich and well-structured approach. It is vital to ensure that pupils are supported to develop their learning in a well sequenced and explicit manner and for us to ensure there is coherence and progression in pupils' acquisition of knowledge, understanding and skills in every subject across each key stage and phase of education.

The Department has commissioned Lucy Crehan to carry out an independent review of the curriculum and to make a series of policy recommendations regarding the purpose, design, specification and implementation of the curriculum in Northern Ireland.

High-performing systems design coherent curricula that emphasise depth of learning over breadth, sometimes referred to as designing curricula for mastery.



Their curricula set out clearly the core knowledge and understanding that all children should be expected to acquire in the course of their schooling.

The current Northern Ireland skilled-based curriculum was introduced in 2007 and was designed to reduce the prescription that had applied since 1989. However, it has been subject to minimal review during the past 17 years. Areas of the current curriculum lack clarity on the core knowledge and skills to be developed and pupils' experience of the curriculum may vary significantly from school to school.

Recent developments in regard to the science of learning have shown that teaching generic skills has little to no transfer value. It is increasingly recognised that knowledge is still extremely important and specific knowledge must be taught *before* specific skills can be developed.

As highlighted in a recent study, it has now re-emerged as a prerequisite for improved learning, critical thinking, problem-solving and reading comprehension, as a facilitator for collective discourse, and as a catalyst for equitable opportunities for all. The evolution in many countries is now towards a new knowledge-guided curriculum that values knowledge yet also attaches specific skills to particular knowledge domains.

Literacy and numeracy are the essential foundation of education. Pupils must develop the necessary literacy and numeracy skills to succeed at school and later

on, in life and at work. There is a critical need for revised literacy and numeracy strategies which take account of recent international research in these key areas and set out the support and resources that will be available to teachers.

So we will:

- **Review and redesign the Northern Ireland curriculum to ensure every child enjoys an ambitious and knowledge-rich curriculum that develops their learning in a well sequenced and explicit manner.**
- **Invest more in high-quality curriculum advice and resources to support teachers in the classroom.**
- **Ensure all children have secure mastery of foundations in both literacy and numeracy at primary school which will enhance later learning and support both equity and attainment.**
- **Develop new strategies for literacy and numeracy based on international best practice.**

Setting and defining high expectations for all and supporting children to take on challenges

At pupil level, in high-performing systems there is a consistent belief that all pupils can learn and achieve at a high level. This belief in high achievement is echoed in setting and defining high expectations and clearly defined learning outcomes for all children.

Northern Ireland is currently without any national measures of school or system performance 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.

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. It is proposed to introduce a system-level check for pupils at the end of Key Stages 1-3. This will be designed and administered by the Council for Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA).

This approach will allow robust measurement of standards over time enabling a

much more authoritative picture of our system's educational performance than is currently possible. Outcomes will not be used for individual school performance measurement nor published at school level.

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.

To support improvement in formative assessment, we also propose to invest in the further development of CCEA's Computer Adaptive Testing (CAT) as a diagnostic/formative assessment tool at pupil level and to inform school self-evaluation.

So we will:

- Support schools to provide rapid, well targeted and evidence-based support when pupils fall behind.
- From the 2025/26 academic year, introduce a system-level sample check for literacy and numeracy and disseminate the assessment results to highlight strengths and challenges for the education system.
- Invest in upscaling and roll-out of CCEA's Computer Adaptive Testing for literacy and numeracy as a free alternative to commercial assessments to inform effective formative and diagnostic assessment in schools.
- Fundamentally review current arrangements for statutory assessment to develop a new system of attainment measures which set high standards and clearly defined learning outcomes for all pupils throughout both primary school and Key Stage 3.

Fit for purpose qualifications raise standards

There is a need to ensure that qualifications are fit for the modern world, not only ensuring that content keeps pace with developments in the economy, technology and the world of work, but that the method of assessment also takes account of issues such as Artificial Intelligence and technological advances.

Further, education research has highlighted serious issues with teaching to the test rather than enhancing pupils' understanding of a subject particularly in relation to high stakes public examinations.

School leaders and teachers have told us that the CCEA specifications for GCSE and A Level qualifications need to be updated. A review will provide an important opportunity to consider issues such as the structure, volume and type of assessment within these qualifications.

Some of the qualifications which have become very popular recently are not those which have the most support from employers and universities, but those which count for more than one GCSE in regard to performance points and can be less demanding on pupils than most GCSEs.

There is a pressing need to review the vast array of qualifications available to schools via the Northern Ireland Entitlement Framework Qualifications Accreditation Number (NIEFQAN) file. Many of these qualifications have never been individually quality assured by CCEA Regulation and some qualifications are over 15 years old.

There is also a need to consider whether more fundamental reform of the qualifications system in Northern Ireland is now required.

So we will:

- Take account of national and international research to consider the structure, volume and type of assessment at Key Stage 4 and post 16 and initiate a review of CCEA qualification specifications.
- Initiate a review of all qualifications approved for teaching in Northern Ireland schools and review the process for qualifications approval.
- Develop a managed exploration of assessment innovation particularly in regard to digital assessment.
- Initiate a wide-ranging civic conversation on more fundamental reform of qualifications to include consideration of the purpose, design and relevance of qualifications in a modern economy.

Accountability and support

Accountability is a central feature of high-performing education systems worldwide. Successful systems internationally combine school autonomy with support rather than punitive sanctions to ensure high-quality, long-term school improvement.

Within schools there is a strong culture of self-evaluation creating ownership of improvement, however, the prolonged period of Action Short of Strike has fundamentally undermined the functioning and coherence of effective systems of accountability.

We invest close to £3 billion in education annually and, as with any public investment, it is critical we have evidence to demonstrate expenditure is being used to best effect, is targeted appropriately and is achieving the desired impact. Yet we are without very basic information on pupil, school and system performance. Re-establishing a clear and robust accountability framework is central to ensuring an effective education system demonstrating value for money to government, taxpayers and parents.

We will, therefore, commission an independent review of accountability arrangements in Northern Ireland to inform the development of a coherent accountability framework.

Inspection is a key part of the education accountability and improvement architecture. It is the key external mechanism for evaluating the quality of education at individual school level and is vital to all learners.

The most fundamental feature of an education system which promotes social mobility is one in which every child is able to attend a good school. Critically, the absence of inspection due to industrial action means that in recent years many schools have not been identified for the support they need to improve.

We cannot continue with the threat and reality of constant disruption to inspection due to Action Short of Strike. The disruption that is witnessed in Northern Ireland is not seen in any other jurisdiction within the United Kingdom or Ireland. New legislation to ensure that the statutory arrangements for inspection are robust and operate effectively is vital.

We also need to provide strong scaffolding and support to schools where it is needed, including developing networks that promote effective school-to-school support and local innovation, particularly through a leaders of education programme. A revised school improvement policy will provide a continuum of

support and identify clearly the different levels and types of support that will be available to schools.

So we will:

- Commission an independent review of accountability arrangements in Northern Ireland.
- Develop a coherent accountability framework to demonstrate value to government, taxpayers and parents and drive improvement through responsibility and answerability.
- Bring forward legislation to ensure that the statutory arrangements for inspection are robust and operate effectively in all circumstances.
- Develop a new school improvement policy to provide a framework to support schools in driving excellence and an improved model of external support when needed.

Greater equity must be a key aim of the education system

Excellence in education is simply not possible without greater equity. Narrowing the gap for educationally disadvantaged groups underpins all aspects of this strategy. Schools can – and must – be engines of social mobility.

The Department currently provides approximately £75 million each year directly to schools for Targeting Social Need through the Common Funding Formula and £8.1 million through the Extended Schools programme.

As highlighted earlier, schools with similar levels of disadvantage currently have very different performance levels at GCSE which indicates the need to review how this delegated funding is being allocated and utilised. It is important that we ensure that it is being used in an evidence-based and well targeted manner for maximum impact.

Children and young people's learning experiences cannot be divorced from other aspects of their development and what happens to them in their families and communities. In the last number of decades, many countries have put in place a range of 'beyond school' interventions to integrate different services.

The new RAISE Programme will provide investment of around £20 million over the next two years, with potential for further funding. The programme will drive forward a whole community, place-based approach to remove the barriers to learning and educational achievement that many of our children and young people are facing.

The RAISE programme will take a structured approach to assessing the impact of interventions on educational attainment and reducing disadvantage. We will monitor and evaluate the approaches taken to inform longer-term policy development regarding educational disadvantage.

The RAISE Programme also provides an important opportunity to support parental agency to engage with their children's education and make more informed decisions and actions.

Raising the age of compulsory education

Most children and young people currently remain in education and training until age 18 but some young people, particularly our most vulnerable, do not.

Regrettably, a young person's background remains a key factor in whether they progress to post-16 education. Extending compulsory education to age 18 will help ensure that all young people, regardless of background, have access to the same educational opportunities.

So we will:

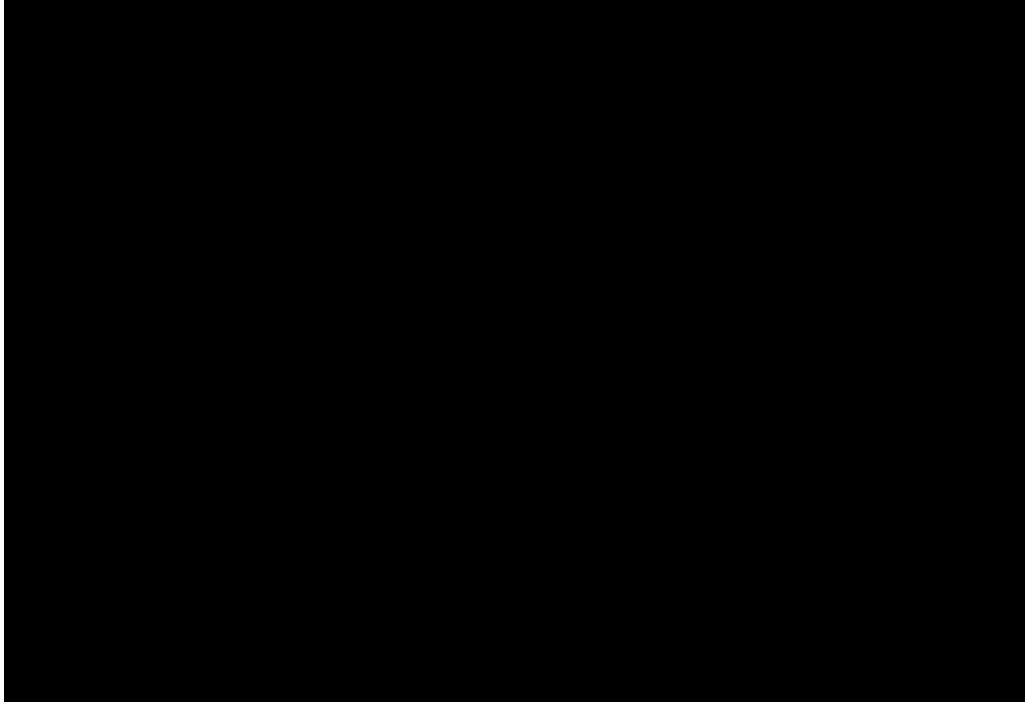
- Introduce legislation to ensure all learners remain in education, apprenticeship or training until age 18.
- Carry out a comprehensive review of all funding targeted at tackling educational disadvantage to ensure it is evidence-informed and well targeted.
- Roll out the RAISE Programme in localities across Northern Ireland to invest in, monitor and evaluate whole community and place-based approaches to raise achievement and reduce educational disadvantage.

Ten Point Plan for educational excellence

This strategy aims to reframe the discussion about education in Northern Ireland and to begin an open and honest conversation about our education system within the wider international context.

The key elements of the strategy have been summarised as a ten point plan for educational excellence in Northern Ireland, which aims to bring a new drive and coherence to the improvement of our system. Each of these ten strategic commitments aims to learn systematically from the most effective and fastest improving school systems in the world.

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Ten Point Plan for educational excellence in Northern Ireland		
1	A KNOWLEDGE-RICH CURRICULUM	We will review and redesign the Northern Ireland curriculum to ensure every child enjoys an ambitious and knowledge-rich curriculum that develops their learning in a well sequenced and explicit manner.
2	HIGH-QUALITY CURRICULUM ADVICE AND RESOURCES	We will provide greater investment in high-quality curriculum advice and resources to support teachers in the classroom.
3	PRIORITISING TEACHER PROFESSIONAL LEARNING	We will ensure there is sustained investment to provide a coherent approach to Teacher Professional Learning that supports teachers throughout their career.
4	EVIDENCE INFORMED APPROACHES TO LITERACY AND NUMERACY	We will introduce new literacy and numeracy strategies informed by evidence and based on international best practice.
5	HIGH STANDARDS AND SYSTEM LEVEL DATA	We will introduce a new system of attainment measures for end of Key Stage assessment to set high standards for all children and provide reliable system level performance measures.

Ten Point Plan for educational excellence in Northern Ireland		
6	PORTABLE, PROGRESSIVE AND FIT FOR PURPOSE QUALIFICATIONS	We will review the qualifications landscape to ensure availability of high-quality qualifications that are up to date, portable and fit for purpose to support progression to a higher level of learning, training, or into employment.
7	A FOCUS ON CONTINUAL EDUCATIONAL IMPROVEMENT	We will introduce a new school improvement policy to provide a framework to support excellence and an improved model of external support for schools.
8	AN INTEGRATED APPROACH TO TACKLE EDUCATIONAL DISADVANTAGE	We will deliver an integrated approach to tackling educational disadvantage providing a continuum of evidence-based interventions within schools, families and communities.
9	ALL LEARNERS ENGAGED IN EDUCATION TO 18	We will introduce legislation to ensure all learners remain in education, apprenticeship or training until age 18.
10	EFFECTIVE ACCOUNTABILITY DRIVING IMPROVEMENT	We will introduce a coherent accountability framework to demonstrate value for money to government, taxpayers and parents and drive improvement through responsibility and answerability.

Governance, monitoring and evaluation

A detailed implementation plan to support this strategy will be published in spring 2025. It will identify lead organisations and delivery mechanisms, as well as funding requirements.

So we will:

- Publish a detailed implementation plan in spring 2025.

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