



AN EVALUATION OF PLANNING PROCESSES IN DEIS POST-PRIMARY SCHOOLS

Inspectorate Evaluation Studies



PROMOTING THE QUALITY OF LEARNING



AN EVALUATION OF PLANNING PROCESSES IN DEIS POST-PRIMARY SCHOOLS

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INSPECTORATE

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An Evaluation of Planning Processes in DEIS Post-primary Schools

Introduction

A new action plan for educational inclusion, the DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) action plan, was launched in 2005 by the Department of Education and Skills. The DEIS action plan was based on the findings of the Educational Disadvantage Committee and was grounded in the belief that every child and young person deserves an equal chance to access, participate in and benefit from education.

Aims of DEIS

The aim of the DEIS action plan was to ensure that the educational needs of children and young people from disadvantaged communities were met. At its core was a standardised system for identifying and regularly reviewing levels of disadvantage, and an integrated *School Support Programme* (SSP) that would bring together and build upon existing interventions for schools. The interventions included the following:

- Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) Scheme
- School Completion Programme (SCP)
- Support Teachers Project
- Giving Children an Even Break
- Breaking the Cycle
- Disadvantaged Area Scheme
- Literacy and Numeracy Schemes

Among the key measures to be implemented under the DEIS action plan were: the streamlining of existing measures for addressing education disadvantage, targeted measures to tackle problems of literacy and numeracy, and measures to enhance student attendance, educational progression, retention and attainment. It was expected that the integration of the HSCL Scheme and the SCP services into the SSP framework would be effected over a five-year period. Schools were expected to place a renewed emphasis on the involvement of parents and families in children's education by incorporating the HSCL function into their three-year action plan.

Additional supports for DEIS schools

Primary and post-primary schools participating in DEIS receive significant additional supports and resources including additional staffing to assist them in achieving the aims of the initiative. The level of additional supports and resources allocated to schools participating in DEIS varies according to the level of disadvantage in the school community. Post-primary schools receive an additional allocation of teaching hours, along with specific additional funding by way of a DEIS grant and a book grant. Each DEIS school also receives support from a home-school-community liaison coordinator and from the School Completion Programme.

Undertakings by DEIS schools

Schools that receive additional support and resources through participation in DEIS are expected to support the DEIS action plan through a systematic planning and monitoring process at individual school level and at school cluster/community level. The involvement of students, parents, local communities and agencies operating at local level is considered an important dimension of the planning process. Schools are expected to develop action plans focusing on the following areas: attendance, retention, educational progression, literacy and numeracy, examination attainment (at second level), parent and community partnership, partnership between schools and links with external agencies. Progress in the implementation of these action plans should be kept under review and adjusted in light of experience.

A tailored planning template was developed by the support services to facilitate DEIS schools in developing their own individual three-year action plans. By using these templates for action planning, schools could supplement and extend established school development planning practices. Principals, boards of management and in-school management teams, who were already responsible for leading the planning process in their schools, were expected to

support the implementation of the DEIS action plans. It was intended that the planning template developed by the support services would assist schools to include targets at school level under each of the agreed areas of focus, referred to in this report as the DEIS themes. The targets were to be agreed at whole-school level, with all staff members then taking them into account as appropriate in their planning for teaching and learning.

1. EVALUATING THE PLANNING PROCESS IN DEIS SCHOOLS

In 2010, the Department of Education and Skills conducted an evaluation of the school-based action planning processes underpinning the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) initiative in primary and post-primary schools. The purpose of the evaluation was: to ascertain the extent to which schools were engaging in the planning process and devising action plans; to assess the quality of the action plans; and to establish the extent to which schools could indicate the impact of the action plans on the learning outcomes for students. This report outlines the findings of the evaluation from 18 post-primary DEIS schools.

In their planning processes, schools are expected to develop three-year cyclical plans in which the DEIS themes are prioritised according to the needs of the school. The DEIS themes are: attendance, retention, progression, examination attainment, literacy, numeracy, partnership with parents and partnership with the community. Due to thematic overlap, this evaluation combined two areas, partnership with parents and partnership with the community. Thus, this report will refer to seven DEIS themes. The guidance provided to schools emphasises the need for planning processes to include: target setting; identification and implementation of strategies and interventions to achieve targets; and ongoing review of the extent to which the targets are being achieved.

1.1 Evaluation Framework

The evaluation focused on school planning processes with regard to each of the following DEIS themes:

- Attendance
- Retention
- Progression
- Examination Attainment
- Literacy
- Numeracy
- Partnership with parents and others

Each of the above themes was examined with reference to the quality of the following four aspects of the planning process:

- Target-setting practices, including collection of baseline data and data analysis
- The strategies and interventions used to achieve the targets set or to promote other DEIS-related objectives
- The implementation of those strategies and interventions
- The progress made by the school with regard to the targets or objectives set

Inspectors used a four-point quality continuum to evaluate the quality of the schools' planning processes in relation to each DEIS theme. This involved assigning one of the following quality descriptors to each aspect of the planning process in the context of each DEIS theme:

- Significant strengths
- Strengths outweigh weaknesses
- Weaknesses outweigh strengths
- Significant weaknesses

An elaboration on the types of practices to which the above descriptors refer is contained in Appendix 1.

1.2 School sample

Nationally, eighteen post-primary schools were selected at random across the educational sectors. This represents 8.91% of the total number of schools in the School Support Programme (SSP) under the DEIS action plan for educational inclusion.

Chart 1: Distribution of school sectors in support programme

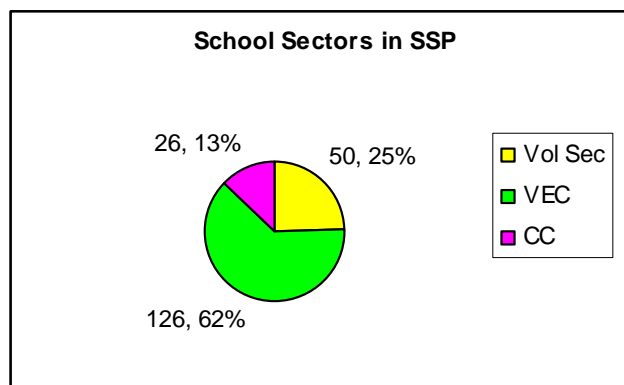
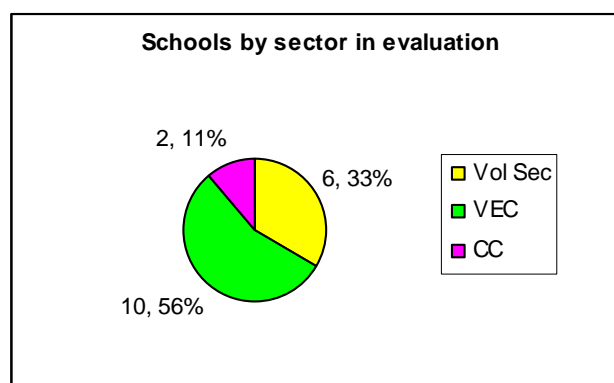


Chart 2: Distribution of school sectors in the evaluation



1.3 Evaluation activities

Twenty-three post-primary inspectors were involved in the evaluation. A team of two inspectors conducted the evaluation in each of the eighteen selected schools over the course of one week in October and November, 2010. Three days were allocated to school-based evaluation activities during which data relevant to various aspects of the DEIS planning process in the school were collected.

Information was gathered through:

- A school information form
- Interview with Principal
- Meetings with a focus group of parents and other relevant stakeholders in the school
- Student Questionnaire (third year and fifth year)
- Parent Questionnaire (third year and fifth year)
- Document Review
- Observation of lessons and interventions
- Feedback to the principal and a representative group from the staff
- Information gathered from schools' internal retention and attendance records
- State Examinations Commission (SEC) data
- National Education Welfare Board (NEWB) data

1.4 Feedback

Following their analysis of data inspectors prepared a draft record of the key findings in relation to the school's engagement in the planning process. On the fifth day of the evaluation, oral feedback was provided and the key strengths and areas for development were discussed with the principal and a number of teachers in each of the schools. Subsequently, each school received a draft written record of the evaluation. Following procedures outlined in *Publication of School Inspection Reports* (Inspectorate 2006), each school was invited to inform the Inspectorate of any errors of fact in the draft records. The written records were then issued to the schools for school response.

1.5 Findings

The evaluation had a two-fold purpose. It aimed to provide feedback to schools to affirm positive aspects of their engagement with the DEIS planning process and to guide them in areas in need of development. It also aimed to collate information about planning processes in the eighteen schools to inform future policy in relation to DEIS. The collated data was analysed and the findings are outlined in the following sections of the report.

Each section outlines the main strengths and weaknesses in the planning processes identified during the evaluation in relation to one DEIS theme.

2. OVERALL FINDINGS: ATTENDANCE

The National Educational Welfare Board (NEWB) has responsibility for and reports nationally on attendance in schools and the most recently published analysis¹ clearly indicates the reality that "DEIS schools show higher figures for all forms of non-attendance. 20-day absences are about twice the rate in DEIS schools compared to non-DEIS schools. A similar pattern is shown for expulsions and suspensions." The importance of attendance was fully understood by the post-primary schools evaluated. Even where schools had not set targets, they reported attendance as being an ongoing priority. Curricular programmes such as the Junior Certificate Schools Programme (JCSP) and the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) have a particular role in relation to attendance. The LCA accredits students for attendance.

2.1 Target setting for Attendance

Findings: Attendance

	Targets and data	Strategies and Interventions	Implementation and Impact	Progress
Strengths (significant strengths/strengths outweigh weaknesses)	44% (8)	67% (12)	44% (8)	39% (7)
Scope for development (weaknesses outweigh strengths/significant weaknesses)	56% (10)	33% (6)	56% (10)	61% (11)

Less than half the schools (44%) had strengths in the area of target setting for improving attendance. In these schools, particular emphasis was placed on attendance and schools were effective in collecting, logging and tracking attendance. For example, they kept good attendance records and developed systematic methods for gathering data, and they analysed data with a view to developing targeted strategies. Some schools were engaged to the extent that they were aware of the importance of setting targets to improve attendance but these

¹ Analysis of School Attendance Data in Primary and Post-Primary Schools, 2006/7 and 2007/8

schools may not have set specific and measurable targets, their use of data may not have been accurate or they may not have used data. The following examples of strengths in the area of collecting data and agreeing targets reported by inspectors are indicative:

The school used available data to identify attendance as a specific priority area for improvement and development. In 2009/10, the target of 90% attendance was achieved.

These measurable and realistic targets are informed by data generated by the school's own well-established and effective tracking systems.

Some comparative analysis of the attendance of year groups has taken place

Some targets are directly related to identified problems

In some schools the effectiveness of the SCP and HSCL or of guidance department plans were reported as assisting in setting targets for improving attendance.

There was scope for development in the majority of schools (56%), in relation to setting specific targets to improve attendance. Weaknesses identified were lack of specific and measurable targets, not targeting specific cohorts, lack of accurate baseline data that would inform target setting and lack of analysis. Since there was little or no data analysis in these schools, they missed important clues. For example, a school did not associate its very high suspension rate with poor retention or attendance and took no account of the impact of high suspension on either. It did not address the issue of suspension anywhere in DEIS planning.

2.2 Strategies and interventions for attendance

A majority of schools (67%) had good or very good strategies and interventions for encouraging attendance. Schools were praised by inspectors for having a "systematic and effective" approach and for the variety of strategies and interventions used to encourage attendance. Measures frequently mentioned as being effective for attendance were the use of text messages to parents and of the ePortal system. An effective strategy reported was a targeted approach for specific students. Individual Attendance Plans had been developed through the SCP.

Inspectors noted that schools rated good or very good had developed tracking and monitoring systems and that rewards were frequently used as incentives in the area of attendance. However, students' responses to questionnaires suggested that a minority of students received these rewards. There was evidence that the LCA and JCSP, which include attendance as an integral accredited part of the programmes, were effective in acting as an incentive to maintain positive attendance. In one instance, even where in general there was less than effective practice with regard to most attendance aspects, the two programmes were highlighted as functioning well with regard to attendance strategies. Sixteen of the eighteen schools provided the LCA programme, one planned to introduce it and the remaining school was considering doing so. The JCSP was provided in seventeen of the eighteen schools. The remaining school intended to introduce it in the next academic year. While recognised as very effective, the JCSP was frequently used for a discrete group within the school, sometimes for those with special educational needs (SEN). Some schools were becoming increasingly aware of the importance of earlier intervention and were beginning to act when patterns of poor attendance were beginning to be established, for example, in first year. Strategies such as breakfast clubs organised by SCP and consultation with NEWB, usually through education welfare officers, also appeared to be helpful in some schools. The evaluation findings suggest that schools should listen to the voice of students: in a school that had discontinued the breakfast club on the grounds that it was ineffective, 55% of students surveyed thought it was a good idea. Some evidence of collaboration and of whole-school approaches to attendance strategies was apparent as illustrated by one inspector:

Positive strategies to promote attendance have also been introduced...including close consultation with the school's Education Welfare Officer, the SCP-run breakfast and lunch clubs...

There was scope for development in the use of strategies and interventions for attendance in one third (33%) of the schools. Where interventions were not functioning well or had not been established on a firm footing, ineffective or absent personnel was cited as the reason for cessation of strategies or failure to develop, for example, breakfast clubs. In one case inadequate logging and tracking systems meant that there was a very limited range of interventions put in place. In another school, poor practice in this area was consistent with the general low level of engagement in planning across all DEIS themes. In a school with a high rate of absenteeism, students were locked out of the school during lunch time thus forcing them to go home or elsewhere.

2.3 Implementation, impact and progress of attendance strategies

Less than half (44%) of the schools were rated by inspectors as being either good or very good in implementing strategies and interventions to improve attendance. Seven of the eighteen schools (39%) reported that there was an overall improvement in attendance rates, although progress was modest in some of these. A number of examples of progress were reported. One school set and achieved a target of 90% attendance. A second had reduced absenteeism by 20%. In many instances little progress had been made in the area of chronic absenteeism (20+ days) despite the existence of good tracking and monitoring mechanisms and a menu of interventions. In one of the most effective schools, there had been an overall improvement in attendance but the most challenging cohort had made no gains.

Implementation of interventions to improve attendance was more effective when all personnel were involved. In schools with effective practice, for example, all teachers had some role in tracking and monitoring attendance on a daily basis either as subject teachers or as tutors. The role of in-school management was deemed to be important: year heads, post holders acting as attendance officers and SCP personnel working as attendance monitors all assisted in implementing strategies for improving attendance. A co-ordinated approach involving agencies that were separate and discrete at the time of the evaluation was also a significant indicator of success, for example the NEWB, SCP and HSCL. The following inspectors' comments indicate positive practice:

During the evaluation, evidence of whole-staff involvement in working to increase attendance rates was gathered.

The roles of the HSCL coordinator and SCP coordinator are important.

..a list of students with poor attendance patterns had been identified and monthly meetings are held with the educational welfare officer to monitor progress and further identify students who are developing patterns of poor attendance.

Just over half (56%) of schools had weaknesses in implementing strategies and in measuring progress (61%) in relation to improving attendance. In four schools (22%), lack of data made it impossible to determine progress either way. In three schools, attendance for the most challenging cohort actually deteriorated. In one, the rate of chronic absenteeism had doubled and ranged between 55% and 60% of the student population. In two of these schools, inspectors identified poor practice in student management. In some instances, there was a failure to select appropriate strategies in an integrated way and to implement these consistently. Consequently, the degree of progress was non-existent. For example, while a school had attendance certificates as a reward for very good attendance:

the practice was not universal and is not part of a coherent set of attendance strategies and interventions targeted at improvement.

The absence of personnel was cited as one reason for failing to implement new targeted strategies. Local reasons were also offered for failure to implement strategies, for example, building work led to the suspension of both the breakfast and homework clubs in one school. Where progress was poor, targets were not specific enough or were not focused on discrete groups. This occurred when those with chronically poor attendance were broadly targeted as

a generic group without analysis of the needs of specific subsets within this group. The lack of progress within specific groups is illustrated in the following comments from inspectors:

The above interventions are having measurable impact and progress with reducing the number of days of absence throughout the school. However, the proportion of students who are absent for twenty or more days remains very high.

The overall absence rate declined from 24% in 2007/8 to 19% in 2008/9 and 21% in 2009/10... 58%-66% range of students miss more than 20 days a year.

2.4 Students and Parents on Attendance

The views of students and their parents on attendance were sought through questionnaires. A small majority of students (51.4%) indicated that they liked coming to school but a greater proportion of their parents (71.65%) suggested that their children liked coming to school. 95.6% of students claimed to attend regularly. However 17.5% said they missed a lot of days and 54.1% stated that they sometimes stayed out of school for reasons other than sickness. Schools should explore the reasons for such absenteeism to determine, for example, if this relates to aspects of practice such as suspension. Parents concurred broadly with students indicating in 98.4% of cases that their child attended school most days but that their child missed a lot of days during the previous academic year in 15.9% of cases. The very small discrepancy may suggest that in a very small number of cases parents are unaware of their child's absenteeism.

Rewarding attendance through certificates and prizes was a strategy commonly deployed in schools. However, while 48.6% of students stated that students in their classes got such awards, 64% said that they themselves had never received one since attending their schools. 59.9% of parents stated that the schools gave rewards for attendance but 24.5% stated that the school did not, and 15.5% did not know. It is possible that a sizable minority of students do not meet criteria to receive school awards for attendance. However, the criteria used may need to be reviewed by some schools. This corroborates the evaluation finding that strategies were not targeted enough and progress was disappointing in some cases. A large number of parents stated that the school contacted them if their child missed school (83.9%) and this positively reflects on efforts schools have been making to develop their attendance monitoring strategies.

2.5 Conclusion

Overall, the position regarding planning for attendance improvement remains mixed in DEIS schools. Less than half were beginning to adopt a focused approach to the collection and analysis of data and target setting for attendance. The picture is more positive in relation to strategies and interventions: a majority of schools are reported as having effective strategies in place. The culture of schools is also important. Effective schools adopted whole-school approaches and integrated a range of measures. Some however may need to be reviewed. Least effective practice was notable where information was poor, where targeting was either non-existent or generalised and where there were no clear lines of responsibility for progress. There was scope for development in a majority of schools with regard to measuring progress. The need to focus on particular groups of students who appeared resistant to existing efforts was apparent. While it is acknowledged that external forces may be an influence, schools need to have a strategic, targeted approach and early intervention is crucial. In relation to both attendance and retention, schools need to evaluate practice in relation to suspension.

3 OVERALL FINDINGS: RETENTION

Ireland has a relatively high retention rate to Leaving Certificate. It is very positive that in the recently published figures on national retention rates, the picture in DEIS schools appears to be improving but there is still a considerable gap between DEIS and non-DEIS schools:

The average Leaving Certificate retention rate in DEIS schools increased by 5 percentage points from 68.2% to 73.2% from 2001 to 2004 while the retention rate in non-DEIS schools increased from 85.0% to 87.4% over the same period.²

The age at which compulsory education finishes in Ireland is sixteen. Schools are cognisant in the first place of retaining all students up until completion of the compulsory phase. Schools also encourage as many students as possible to remain in full time education until they complete one of the three Leaving Certificate programmes, the established Leaving Certificate (LC), the LCA and the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP). Through the design of their curricular and guidance programmes, schools also encourage students to continue beyond the LC and to take up further education and third-level courses. The aim of the School Completion Programme (SCP) is to impact positively on levels of student retention and all of the schools in this evaluation had access to the programme. However, the absence of personnel, or availability only on a part time basis had a negative effect on some schools.

Findings: Retention

	Targets and data	Strategies and Interventions	Implementation and Impact	Progress
Strengths (significant strengths/strengths outweigh weaknesses)	56% (10)	72% (13)	61% (11)	50% (9)
Scope for development (weaknesses outweigh strengths/significant weaknesses)	44% (8)	28% (5)	39% (7)	50% (9)

3.1 Target setting for retention

In the area of retention, the majority (56%) of schools were rated as good or very good at using data and setting targets. This suggests that a fair number of schools were focusing considerable effort on encouraging students to remain at school. The effectiveness of the SCP and HSCL in the areas of both retention and attendance were cited by inspectors as factors in relation to good performance in these areas; for example inspectors referred to the SCP retention plan. In some schools targets were developed in consultation with a wide group and in some cases, this included collaboration with parents. Effective data gathering and use of such data affected all areas. Examples of effective practice, where schools had developed clear, achievable, measurable and time-bound targets were cited by inspectors:

... the identified targets, which include all students completing junior cycle and transferring to and completing senior cycle, are measurable and time bound.

However, there was scope for development in 44% of the schools. Some of these schools were not fully engaged in target setting, and analysis and recording of data were limited or not up to date. Inspectors noted that in some cases schools had not set targets and in others that targets were too broad.

There was very limited data available. The school did not identify the fact that a very large cohort leaves the school in senior cycle.

Some schools set unrealistic targets and in one case targets were set by management without reference to other stakeholders in the school. Schools may be ignoring signs: for

² Retention Rates of Pupils in Second Level Schools, May 2011, DES.

example, in a school with a high drop out rate after the Junior Certificate, an inspector observed:

The school has not faced this issue and there is no specific strategy in place to deal with early school leavers in the senior cycle.

In some schools, data gathered were poor and did not allow for appropriate targeting. There were no retention data based on gender, for example. In a small number of schools, and running counter to normal trends³, female retention was poor and this was not being specifically addressed.

3.2 Strategies and interventions for retention

A majority of schools (72%) were rated good or very good with regard to having strategies and interventions for improving retention. Among the effective measures identified by inspectors were: programmes of pastoral care, third-level access programmes, teaching interventions and supports, guidance department, life skills coaching, mentoring, counselling, HSCL and SCP initiatives, and induction and transfer programmes at critical points of transition. A variety of resources and teaching approaches was considered influential in the areas of both retention and progression. Well developed links with feeder primary schools, often linked to induction programmes, and programmes such as the LCA, LCVP, and JCSP were considered to be significant. Some of the retention strategies targeted at the most vulnerable students such as breakfast clubs, homework clubs and after-school activities were managed by the SCP. Others, such as games, music, dance, theatre were organised by subject departments or by individual teachers. The role of teachers in the schools is worth noting and in one school with good retention rates, this was highlighted:

The good relationship between teachers and students is a factor in encouraging students to remain in school.

There was scope for development regarding strategies to improve retention in 29% of the schools. In some of these schools, activities available to support retention were not being well used or were not used at all as the following advice indicates:

Maximising the potential that a breakfast club has to offer also merits consideration by the school. The impact of such a reintroduction on punctuality and attendance, as well as other possible benefits, can then be tracked and analysed over time.

Strategies for retention and progression were sometimes integrated. In some cases, inspectors reported that there was a low level of participation in after-school activities they had observed. It was also reported that schools were not routinely collecting data on participation. External factors also impacted on retention. In one school, competition from Youthreach and the “weekly cheque” was cited as a reason for students leaving after completion of the JCSP.

3.3 Implementation, impact and progress of retention strategies

The majority (61%) of schools were rated good or very good in implementing strategies and in making progress (50%) to improve retention. In addition to teaching staff and school pastoral care teams, personnel identified with schemes such as the HSCL, SCP, and National Behaviour Support Service (NBSS) were all instrumental in implementing effective strategies. Good practice noted was the assignment of clearly defined roles to individuals. A considerable strength in the best schools was the capacity to engage in reflective and ongoing review: to use data effectively, to examine what was not successful and to undertake corrective action. Examples of good practice are illustrated by the following comments from inspectors:

³ “A gender gap (4.1%) remains at national level between male and female cohorts. The unadjusted retention rate to Leaving Certificate for males in the 2004 cohort was 82.4%, compared with 86.5% for females. The gender gap is far lower than in previous years.” Retention Rates of Pupils in Second Level Schools, May 2011 DES.

Examination of data available to the inspectors showed that the school has been successful in retaining its students to Leaving Certificate and compares very favourably with the national averages.

Very good progress has been made and some very good interventions are in place. Data is monitored closely by the relevant coordinators and outcomes are discussed at meetings. The significant successes of this school in the context of DEIS are the steady improvements in retention, literacy, examination attainment, progression to further education and enhanced partnership with parents.

Impact [of retention strategies] was measured: there was real improvement; fluctuation or deterioration in retention was analysed to identify reasons with a view to taking corrective action where feasible and practicable.

There was scope for development in implementing strategies in fewer than half (39%) the schools and in half there were weaknesses in progress. Since there was little or no data analysis, schools can miss important clues. For example, and as previously stated, a school which did not associate its very high suspension rate with poor retention or attendance and did not address the issue anywhere in DEIS planning. In another school where progress was difficult to quantify, 97% of student respondents to the questionnaire expressed a desire to complete the LC. The following statements by inspectors provide examples of poor measurement of progress and of lack of leadership or of accepting responsibility for measuring progress:

Measuring the effect of these and other interventions in improving retention rates is hampered by the absence of reliable data.

There is little evident tracking of progress with the initial DEIS targets, and it is unclear who has overall responsibility for this at the school.

3.4 Parents and Students on Retention

The views of students and their parents about strategies for retention, obtained through survey questions, revealed a number of issues. For example, 72.2% of students believed that a breakfast club was a good idea but only 18.4% actually attended one. This may mean that there was no such activity available in the school, or that only a small (usually targeted) number availed of it. It is also possible, as reported in one case, that snacks were offered to every student in the school and distributed during the morning break. Such practice should be reviewed to determine its purpose regarding improvement in either attendance or retention. When students were asked if they liked to attend after-school clubs and activities like sport, which are designed to encourage students to remain in school, a small majority stated they did (53.2%) while a large minority either did not (42%) or did not know (4.8%). The majority of parents surveyed indicated that their children did not attend these activities (66.5%). This is not consistent with national figures, where 26.5% of parents surveyed during Whole-School Evaluation – Management, Leadership and Learning (WSE-MLL) indicated that their children were not involved in a variety of extra-curricular activities.⁴ Observation during the evaluation indicates that there were very few activities provided and that there were low levels of participation in after school activities in some DEIS schools. Routine collection of data in this regard was not apparent. This issue should be explored further by schools to establish patterns of participation and to encourage students to engage in extra-curricular programmes.

3.5 Conclusion

As in all DEIS themes, data gathering from a number of sources and measurement of progress in the area of retention were areas for development whereas effective strategies and interventions to improve retention were generally identified. Discrete data on gender were not

⁴ This figure is based on the aggregate parent data from 1,943 parents surveyed in 16 schools during WSE-MLL evaluations conducted nationally from September to December 2010, the period within which the DEIS evaluations were carried out.

gathered and in some cases this had a detrimental effect. Schools that were more successful in improving retention integrated the work of various bodies and agencies and had good guidance programmes and well developed lines of communication with parents. In order to improve interventions, schools should seek the views of students and parents about, for example, the role of breakfast clubs and other activities to ensure that interventions and strategies are targeted at those who need them. Extra-curricular activities before school, during lunchtime and after school could be further exploited.

4. OVERALL FINDINGS: PROGRESSION

For the purpose of this evaluation, progression refers to the extent to which students move from primary to post-primary school, from junior to senior cycle and from senior cycle to further or higher education. All three are the concern of post-primary schools. The vast majority of pupils transfer from primary to post-primary schools. However, retention of students from junior to senior cycle is lower in DEIS schools than in other schools and fewer students in DEIS schools complete a leaving certificate programme.

Findings: Progression

	Targets and data	Strategies and Interventions	Implementation and Impact	Progress
Strengths (significant strengths/strengths outweigh weaknesses)	39% (7)	67% (12)	50% (9)	50% (9)
Scope for development (weaknesses outweigh strengths/significant weaknesses)	61% (11)	33% (6)	50% (9)	50% (9)

4.1 Target setting for progression

Fewer than half the schools (39%) had set good or very good targets to encourage progression to third-level education. In schools where good practice was noted, there was a clear focus on progression. In some, data on progression was collected, logged and tracked, in others ambitious but realistic targets were set for progression. The following examples illustrate good practice in target setting for progression:

Targets in relation to educational progression were set for the rates of senior students progressing to higher education, further education, apprenticeship, and employment. Destination surveys were undertaken a few times a year.

Data is analysed. Parent and students are consulted. Parent questionnaires and student questionnaires are used for the various initiatives.

The school wants to ensure that at least 50% of LC students progress to further education. (In this school, 76% of surveyed students expressed a desire to proceed to further education.)

There was scope for development in the setting of targets for progression in a majority (61%) of schools. Frequently, targets were not SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time bound), for example:

Targets have been established in relation to educational progression... However, these targets need to be more measurable and time bound

Where less effective practice was noted, some transfer points were omitted or received only cursory attention in schools' planning processes. For example:

The school should include progression from junior cycle to senior cycle in future analysis of progression data.

In other cases, inspectors suggested that expectations were not high and recommended:

The school should set targets to raise expectations for progression to third level.

4.2 Strategies and interventions for progression

A majority of schools (67%) had good or very good strategies or interventions for progression. Exemplars of good practice were: good access programmes, effective SCP and HSCL activities, transfer programmes from primary to post-primary school, appropriate curriculum informed by a student-centred approach with a good range of programmes, mixed-ability setting, good subject choice information and taster programmes. The following example of an effective transfer programme from primary to post-primary school was praised by an inspector:

Very good supports are in place for the progression of students from primary schools to secondary school, from junior cycle to senior cycle and on to further education. The Belonging + targeted first-year induction programme, co-ordinated by the learning-support co-ordinator, has set very clear goals for the 2010/11 school year involving the further development of a range of interventions.

The LCA programme, aimed at students who wish to follow a practical programme with a strong vocational emphasis, was generally working well in schools where it was well managed. Good practice was also identified where schools reviewed and adjusted their curriculum, both for programmes and subjects, to ensure that the needs and ambitions of all students were being met.

A wide variety of strategies were in place to encourage progression to third level and these were usually devised or managed by the guidance department. In addition to help with completion of CAO forms, funding for the process was provided in some instances. Visits to higher option conferences and links with various local businesses and community partnerships were also found useful in providing additional resources and advice for students. Access programmes to third level were regarded as effective especially for higher achievers and the more ambitious students, and these programmes were valued by the schools. Access programmes were associated with various third-level institutions throughout the country. The institutions worked in partnership with schools and had a range of interventions to ensure better representation of socially disadvantaged students at third level. Having a Post-Leaving Certificate (PLC) course on site or close by was seen as a way of encouraging more students, frequently the more vulnerable students, to transfer beyond post-primary school.

There was scope for development in 33% of the schools in relation to strategies and interventions to improve students' progression. In these schools there was limited availability of an intervention, for instance only limited places were available in the homework club or the intervention had been suspended due to local conditions and little or nothing has been provided to remedy this. In other instances, inspectors reported that some students had a limited learning experience or limited subject choices with consequences for progression to further and higher education. Examples given were shorter than usual timetables and fewer than usual subject choices for particular students, some students not being offered Irish or students not taking any subject at higher level. In some cases inspectors reported that the school was not doing enough, if anything at all, to raise parents' expectations or to encourage and support parents in their ambition for their children. The following comments illustrate these issues:

JCSP students' subject choices are limited Students are being assigned to LCA rather than choosing it.

There is scope for developing parental and student expectation and ambition through a range of explicit interventions and in the kinds of subliminal messages that can be given during events, communication with parents and opportunities for awards.

4.3 Implementation, impact and progress of progression strategies

Fewer than half the schools had made good or very good progress in relation to progression. Inspectors noted that some schools had effectively integrated structures and initiatives already in use into the DEIS planning process

There are clear intentions to build on the existing structures to support students in progressing to further education. The objectives include encouraging students to continue to visit centres for third-level education, promoting and enhancing the (name of area) careers exhibition, establishing links with the National Learning Network, and continuing to promote visits by guest speakers including former students of the school.

Conversely in some of the 50% of schools where there was scope for development regarding progression, lack of data or lack of use of available data made it difficult to see measurable improvements. Half of the schools could not say if any measurable progress had been made due to absence of data or absence of tracking student destinations. In one instance, there was no clear evidence of students' progression being tracked from first to sixth year.

While there are interventions in place to improve educational progression, an analysis of the school's data has not been carried out and progress in achieving the target set has not been measured.

4.4 Parents and Students on progression

In response to survey questions, 97.1% of third-year students reported that they planned to complete the Junior Certificate examination and this concurs with their parents' views (96.9%).

It is very positive that the vast majority of students intended to do the Leaving Certificate (93.1%). Additional effort should be invested by schools in the "don't know" category (5.5%). While it was also positive that most of the third and fifth-year students (79%) surveyed wanted to go to university or further education, 14.8% did not know (slightly larger percentage than parents) and 6.3% stated that they would not progress. Taken as an aggregate, this would suggest that one fifth of students in DEIS schools may not progress further than second-level education.

It was encouraging that parents were ambitious for their children's education: 96.9% of third-year parents stated that their child would do the Junior Certificate examination and 95.3% of all the parent cohort (third year and fifth year) surveyed would like their children to do the Leaving Certificate with only 0.8% stating a contrary view (the lowest negative figure in the survey). 87.7% stated that they would not agree if their children were to decide to leave school at sixteen. A further 6.2% did not know. Regarding progression to third level, 83.3% of the parents surveyed thought it likely that their children would go on to college or further education and training; a further 13.9% did not know. Only 2.7% of parents surveyed felt their child would not go on to third level or further education and training.

The positive expectations of both parents and students regarding progression to Leaving Certificate and on to third level are encouraging. It is important that schools provide the necessary support to enable these expectations to be fulfilled.

4.5. Conclusion

The area of target setting for progression was not yet sufficiently focused in schools' planning for DEIS. This is particularly important regarding progression through senior cycle and to

further education. Targets need to be SMART and those most at risk need specific focus. A variety of strategies to ensure progression from primary to post-primary schools was in place and these approaches were meeting with success. There was increasing emphasis on strategies to ensure transfer of vulnerable students to the senior cycle. Measures to promote and track transfer of students to third level were in place and were normally managed by guidance departments. In all cases the use of data to measure progress and impact made on targets to enhance progression was an area for development. Schools also needed to take account of parents' ambitions for their children: 83.3% of parents would like their children to transfer to third level or further education. The challenges and opportunities this presents for schools should be addressed through the planning process.

5. OVERALL FINDINGS: EXAMINATION ATTAINMENT

Students in all eighteen schools were prepared for the Junior Certificate and for the Leaving Certificate, the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) or the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP). These are high stakes examinations that affect students' chances of progressing to further and higher education. The nature of the LCA is particularly suitable for students who find traditional examinations challenging. Access to programmes and careful management of programmes are important and a variety of practice was observed in schools. The Transition Year (TY) programme was provided in a majority of the 18 schools but the level of engagement of targeted students in TY was not the subject of this evaluation.

Findings: Examination attainment

	Targets and data	Strategies and Interventions	Implementation and Impact	Progress
Strengths (significant strengths/strengths outweigh weaknesses)	22% (4)	50% (9)	28% (5)	28% (5)
Scope for development (weaknesses outweigh strengths/significant weaknesses)	78% (14)	50% (9)	72% (13)	72% (13)

5.1 Target and data for examination attainment

Only 22% of schools were considered good or very good at setting targets to improve examination attainment. In the small number of effective schools, the school had set high expectations of students' performance in examinations and data from in-house and state certificate examinations were analysed. Inspectors reported on good practice:

Through higher expectations of examination achievement being articulated by the school, a dramatic improvement was noted in Junior Certificate English in 2010, with all students taking either ordinary or higher level English. The principal compiles and analyses examination results, correlating results with reading ages on entry and each subject department analyses examination achievement at a subject level.

The principal analyses exam results, subject departments discuss and submit comments and development plans to principal.

There was mixed practice in some schools:

Subject teachers give tests regularly and there are common assessments in use at Christmas and summer. These enable the teachers to assess the students' progress and to provide guidance in relation to targets that the students should aim for. The

results from the questionnaires show that the students feel that they do receive feedback on their learning and that they are encouraged to achieve.

Evidence from the 78% of schools where there were weaknesses in setting targets for improved examination attainment suggests that schools did not use data available to them. Data were not being used for planning either at whole-school or subject department level. A range of comments by inspectors indicates that a number of problems existed: initial assessment or screening tests used by schools may not always have been suitable or fit for purpose; schools did not gather relevant data in a systematic way or on a whole-school basis; analysis of data was not undertaken or schools may not have had the capacity to undertake this; analysed data were not used as a basis for setting measurable targets. Some issues around target setting and data collection are highlighted in inspectors' comments' below:

The school has completed very rudimentary analysis of students' results in the state examinations 2010. This represents the initial stages of data collection but currently this is not enough to measure progress in the area of students' attainment.

Targets for improvement in examination attainment were not evident in the subject department plans either in respect of the performance of targeted students or in respect of the student cohort in general.

More systematic gathering and analysis of data on examination attainment is needed.

The types of entrance assessment tests being used are not fit for purpose.

The school should review screening and diagnostic tests in current use

Data collection is not a whole-school effort; data is collected by some or a few and information is not being trickled down to inform action planning.

Poor level of engagement by subject departments was evident:

There was little quantifiable data that is used in a statistical manner by the teachers to set achievement targets...

Specific targets need to be set at whole-school level and at individual subject department level.

The overall target for examination attainment in the DEIS plan is the specific target for year two (2010/11): increase the number of students taking higher-level papers by 1%. This target is not embedded in all subject departments so that the chance of success is limited. There is a lack of linkage between the planning group and the subject departments in the area of attainment.

5.2 Strategies and interventions for examination attainment

Only half of the schools (50%) had good or very good strategies to improve examination attainment. Inspectors praised effective use of a range of strategies and interventions designed to improve examination outcomes. These included: class organisation, timetabling, varied curriculum, homework clubs, study skills programmes, reporting mechanisms to parents, incentives and awards schemes, good range of teaching methodologies and Easter revision courses. Some specific interventions were identified:

The school initiated its "Raising the Bar" project in 2007-2008 where State examination data was examined and a whole-school strategy was implemented to raise attainment. A review of State examination results indicates a general decrease in the uptake of foundation level in certain subjects over the past three years and an increase in the numbers taking higher level in many subjects.

The school aims to improve examination attainment through its target to reduce the number of Junior Certificate students taking foundation level in English and Mathematics. A range of strategies and inventions to achieve this have been implemented. These include incorporating this target in the English and Mathematics subject departments planning, the provision of a personal development programme emphasising goal setting and the achievement of these goals at junior and senior cycle and a targeted focus on improving literacy levels. With the exception of one class, all students at junior cycle are included in the Junior Certificate Schools Programme and team teaching has now been introduced across most subjects at junior cycle.

The college has no written targets for examination attainment but has identified improved examination attainment as a whole-school goal. The introduction of mixed ability grouping throughout the junior cycle and a determined effort to ensure that all students reach their potential has resulted in an increase in the uptake of higher level papers in the majority of Junior Certificate examinations.

Practical strategies have been devised to help achieve better attainment outcomes. For example, curricular changes and a sixth year scholarship scheme aim to improve attainment among some groups.

The range of initiatives accessed by the JCSP team, and in particular, the very good interventions and strategies being implemented in the demonstration library, combines well with interventions through the NBSS, HSCL and SCP, as well as the school's development of IEPs.

Inspectors reported weaknesses in strategies for improving examination attainment in 50% of schools. In these schools the area of examination attainment was not prioritised or if strategies were in place they were not linked to targets

The school intends to expand its action planning to include a focus on targeting for the two themes of literacy and examination attainment in the next school year

Measures such as a study-skills programme and homework monitoring on a regular basis are applauded but must be linked to improved attainment targets and must be supported by all staff in all classrooms. Issues like the impact of parental support, teacher expectations, student motivation and general school culture all need to be discussed.

5.3 Implementation, impact and progress of examination attainment strategies

Only 28% of schools had strengths in the area of implementation and of making progress in relation to attainment. Subject departments that showed greater awareness of target setting and analyses of examination results were more likely to be cohesive in relation to implementation and were more likely to achieve goals such as the reduction of numbers doing foundation level or improved learning outcomes. Some subject areas were conspicuously more effective in achieving positive outcomes than others and differences between individual teachers were significant. The increase in numbers taking higher level in a particular subject area (usually English and Maths) or reduction in the number taking foundation level was cited in a number of the sample schools.

Progress in relation to improved outcomes for students is mixed but in some subject areas, there are signs of progress, for example, the numbers taking foundation level have decreased in English; there is a recorded increase in the numbers taking higher level in some subjects; in ordinary level LC, the ABC rate has increased.

The introduction of mixed ability grouping throughout the junior cycle and a determined effort to ensure that all students reach their potential has resulted in an increase in the uptake of higher level papers in the majority of Junior Certificate examinations. Almost no students sit foundation level papers. At Leaving Certificate, there has been an increase in the uptake of higher level papers in a number of

subjects including Art, Biology, Construction Studies, Engineering, Geography, History and Irish.

A majority of schools (72%) had weaknesses in relation to the implementation of strategies and to progress made and measured in relation to examination attainment. Since SMART targets (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time bound) were not set in the majority of schools, systematic tracking and analyses of progress could not be undertaken. Low expectations and deterioration in attainment were a concern in some schools:

It is worrying that the number of students who attempted no higher level paper in the Junior Certificate rose from 17 to 31 between 2007 and 2008, while during the same period the percentage of students getting A or B grades on ordinary level papers in particular was over 65% each year. The story at Leaving Certificate was similar, with 50% of students sitting no higher level paper but 55% getting A or B grades on ordinary level papers in 2008. The above baseline data suggests that a significant number of students who could have sat higher level papers did not do so, in a significant number of subjects and this is in need of urgent review across the school.

It was noted that 74% of students achieved A or B in JC ordinary- level papers in 2010. Students likely to achieve high grades at ordinary level should be encouraged to take higher-level papers.

5.4 Examination attainment: the views of parents and students

Analysis of questionnaire responses indicated that more than half of the students surveyed (51.4%) did not like coming to school.⁵ However, a considerable majority (75%) of students liked the subjects they studied in school. They were also positive about their learning and 80.7% felt that they were doing well at their subjects. They believed their teachers supported them and told them how to improve (85.3%) and discussed test results with them (77%). 76.4% of students felt that they were doing well at their homework. Parents were also positive with 92.1% stating that their child was doing well at most of his or her subjects in school. This compares well with the generality of students surveyed in Whole-School Evaluation, Management, Leadership and Learning (WSE-MLL) inspections that occurred in schools in the period when the DEIS data was collected.⁶ While comparisons are indicative only in some cases⁷ 75% of students in all schools said that they enjoyed going to classes and 85% said that they felt that they were getting on well with school work. In DEIS schools, almost 81% felt they were getting on well. Therefore, while in school, there was little difference between students' attitudes to school work in all schools and those in this evaluation in DEIS schools. However, it is worth considering the difference between attitudes to school in a broader sense: 51.4% of DEIS students liked coming to school; 82% of all students were "proud" to be in their schools.

87.4% of students felt that their teachers encouraged them and 85.3% felt that their teachers told them how to improve their work. In response to a very similar question asked of all students in WSE MLLs, 78% said that the teacher told them how to improve. Thus, students' perception of teachers' support is more positive in DEIS schools and this is a tribute to the teachers who are working in challenging contexts.

It would be worth while for schools to establish why a considerable minority (11.9%) of students did not know if they were doing well and why 7.4% did not feel they were doing well. Assessment practice should be reviewed in these cases with greater emphasis on assessment for learning and the provision of formative feedback. Parents were also positive about learning: 92.5% said that their child got homework most days and 94.7% said that their child could usually do the assigned homework; 89.4% said that the teacher checked their child's work. A smaller majority said that their child got extra help if the work was hard

⁵ Questionnaires were returned by 1705 students in 18 schools during the DEIS evaluation.

⁶ WSE-MLL national evaluations, September-December 2010, aggregate student data - 16 schools, 2773 students.

⁷ Questions were phrased differently in the two surveys

(68.9%) while 14.9% felt that the school did not give extra help and 16.2% did not know. It is possible that those who do not know (16.2%) were parents of children who did not require additional help and had no reason to seek it.

A small minority of students (12.2%) stated that they missed out on lessons. There may be a range of explanations for this. For example it is likely that some students were withdrawn from lessons to receive learning support. There may be other reasons to explain why some students were missing lessons. Investigation of this issue was beyond the scope of this evaluation and would require further research.

5.5 Conclusion

Although high stakes examinations dominate post-primary school thinking, in reality there was scope for development in the area of planning for improved examination attainment within the context of the eighteen DEIS schools in this evaluation. While the complexity of this issue is acknowledged, the role of subject departments and subject teachers in the area of examination attainment is crucial to ensure improvement. The findings suggest that there is a need for schools, subject departments and teachers to set clear and measurable targets for improvement in examination performance, to analyse SEC data and to raise expectations in order to improve levels of attainment in examinations. They also suggest that greater emphasis is placed on summative assessment, on assessment on entrance to post-primary school, or on assessment for diagnostic purposes than on assessment for learning (AfL). Finally the provision of a limited curriculum for some students and the use of the additional time available due to this should be further investigated to ensure that these students are not being disadvantaged by limitations in subject choices.

6. OVERALL FINDINGS: LITERACY

Literacy includes the capacity to read, understand and critically appreciate various forms of communication including spoken language, print, broadcast media, and digital media⁸. It encompasses the set of skills that enables students to access the post-primary curriculum and progress through education. There may be a mistaken belief that the development of young people's literacy and numeracy skills should be completed by the end of primary school: this is not the case. We know, in fact, that there will be considerable variation in the level of skills acquired by twelve-year-olds, but many will still be developing these skills. All children of this age will require well-thought-out teaching and purposeful learning experiences in the post-primary school to enable them to acquire the skills they have yet to grasp, to consolidate the skills they have already learned, and to equip them for work, further learning and leisure (*Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life* 2011 p10). In many schools there is a perception that literacy is the responsibility of the teachers of English. Most schools have some form of assessment test at pre-entry level to identify those with special educational needs. This, along with information gleaned from different sources such as liaison with feeder primary schools, with the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) and NEPS, and additional internal testing at the earliest opportunity, allows schools to place students in organisational settings and programmes that are intended to target their literacy and numeracy needs. Although the criteria for placement in the JCSP are wide-ranging, typically students with literacy and numeracy needs are placed in discrete JCSP classes. The resources and teaching approaches advocated in JCSP are most effective when the programme is well co-ordinated and is part of a whole-school approach to supporting literacy and numeracy.

⁸ *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life* (2011) Department of Education and Skills

Findings: Literacy

	Targets and data	Strategies and Interventions	Implementation and Impact	Progress
Strengths (significant strengths/strengths outweigh weaknesses)	39% (7)	39% (7)	33% (6)	33% (6)
Scope for development (weaknesses outweigh strengths/significant weaknesses)	61% (11)	61% (11)	67% (12)	67% (12)

6.1 Target-setting for literacy

There was some variation among the schools in terms of the competence they displayed regarding their target-setting for literacy. In fewer than half (39%) of the schools good target-setting was evident with very good practice in this component of planning for literacy being achieved by one school only. In the majority (61%) of the schools, however, there was scope for development in target-setting for literacy with three of these schools demonstrating notable weaknesses. Among the identified shortcomings with regard to target-setting for literacy were the absence of targets for literacy, failure to set literacy targets out in specific, measurable terms, failure to analyse available data and records, and the confinement of literacy targets to the work of English teachers in English departments or special education teachers. In short, the majority of the schools were found to be at a very early stage of development in terms of their target-setting for literacy. Some of the challenges facing these schools are illustrated in the following excerpts from a selection of inspection reports:

No specific and measurable targets have been set...

With regard to literacy, the school has overall and unspecific targets to improve literacy levels of all students by one year and to improve the reading age of all first years by six months during the school year...The baseline data on literacy is not dated...

The DEIS plan identifies groups of students in need of literacy...support and sets out targets for improvement. While targets indicate a clear commitment to enhancing achievement in English..., considerable work needs to be done in ensuring that the targets are more specific, achievable and framed in a whole-school context.

Target setting is an area for development in literacy. Too many targets have been set for the 2010-2013 period. The current targets primarily apply to the special educational needs (SEN) and English departments, a number of them are not specific, measurable, attainable, realistic and time bound (SMART), and their achievement does not involve all teachers across the curriculum.

In the schools where effective target-setting was evident, the targets were specific and clear, were informed by information derived from test results, and were updated in the light of student performance. An example of the work of a school with strengths in its target-setting for literacy is described as follows:

Clear targets in relation to literacy are formulated in the DEIS plan. These targets relate to the mastery of key words per subject area as well as oral and written expression. There is also a measurable target in relation to students with low reading ages and very good records, with frequent testing and retesting of students, are in place in this area.

6.2 Strategies and interventions for literacy

The evaluation findings with regard to the strategies and interventions used by the schools to improve literacy levels of students showed mixed levels of competence and engagement by schools in this aspect of the DEIS planning process. Resources and strategies associated with JCSP were being used effectively in schools. JCSP libraries played a pivotal role in those schools that had them. Fewer than half of the schools (39%) had strengths in provision of strategies and interventions to improve literacy.

An example of the work of a school with a number of significant strengths in its implementation of literacy strategies and interventions was described as follows:

An extensive range of literacy initiatives is in place including Drop Everything and Read, which is school wide, the Reading Challenge, the Readathon, the celebration of world book week, book boxes, the use of dictionaries, thesauruses and key word notebooks in classrooms and the Spelling Challenge. In addition, the school has and will again introduce paired reading and Make a Book. A very attractive reading corner has recently been developed in the school library. It is commendable that the English department has improved this library and made it a welcoming and well-resourced space for students despite the absence of the JCSP library initiative. The behavioural support class partakes in a range of literacy programmes. Literacy is also timetabled for all JCSP classes. The whole-school approach to improving literacy can be seen from the widespread use of key words and very attractive learning environments and from the labelling of different rooms in different languages. ... Individual Education Plans have been developed for targeted students who are not in JCSP while JCSP students benefit from profiling. The commitment of the JCSP coordinator and the special educational needs (SEN) team and their range of praiseworthy literacy and other strategies are commended. Literacy courses are also provided for parents in conjunction with the VEC. The observation of a number of lessons indicated good student engagement with reading and seventy-three percent of students surveyed reported that they liked English and furthermore, seventy percent reported that they were good at writing and spelling.

However, in a disappointingly high number of instances there was scope for development in relation to the literacy strategies and interventions used (61%), with just one of the 18 schools displaying optimal practice in this regard. Among the problems identified by inspectors in relation to the literacy targets and interventions were:

- Insufficient regard in subject department planning to the literacy objectives contained in the school's action plan. This was a common theme in inspectors' reports.
- Lack of awareness on the part of teachers of interventions and initiatives established in the school
- Absence of a shared approach by teachers to the implementation of literacy strategies and interventions
- Insufficient involvement of parents in strategies and interventions

The following extracts illustrate some of the deficiencies in relation to literacy strategies and interventions that were noted in the course of the evaluation:

...considerable work needs to be done in developing a whole-school approach to addressing the literacy ... needs of the students. Subject-department planning makes little or no reference to the DEIS targets in this area and the absence of posters, keywords and other appropriate support materials on the walls of the classrooms offers further evidence of the progress that has yet to be made. Each subject department should agree the key priority areas and the classroom approaches to be adopted in delivering them. These should then be integrated into the subject plans...

.. the absence of DEIS targets in the subject plans reviewed suggests that literacy ... strategies have not been discussed...

Overall, the evidence suggests that there is a need for schools to implement more effectively a broader range of literacy strategies and interventions and, more specifically, to strengthen

cross-curricular interventions and strategies, extending beyond English lessons and special education settings.

6.3 Implementation, impact and progress of literacy strategies

Findings regarding the measurement of student progress in literacy were disappointing as they indicated that only one third of schools (33%) had strengths in this area. There were deficiencies in this aspect of the planning process in a significant majority (67%) of the schools. The evaluation suggests that many of the schools inspected needed to develop a systematic method of assessing the progress of students in literacy that would include re-testing at specified intervals and analysis of results with reference to baseline data, the literacy targets set and the literacy strategies and interventions being used by the school. Some of the shortcomings surrounding the measurement of student progress in literacy evident in the schools inspected were reported by inspectors as follows:

While the targeted group had been identified through a standardised reading test administered as part of the college's entry procedures, there was no re-assessment data available to gauge their progress.

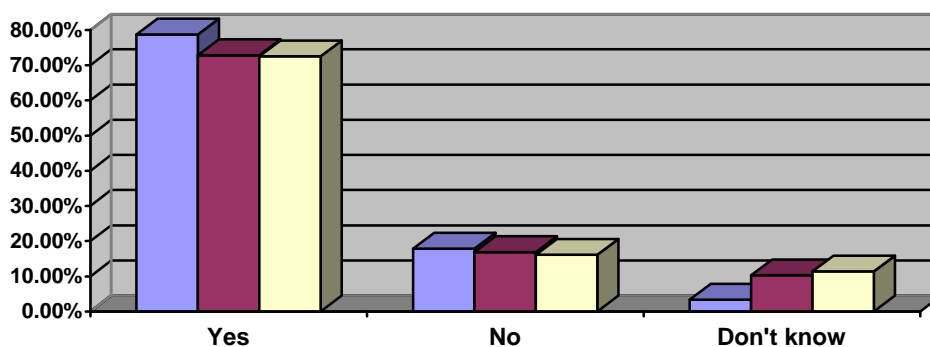
While some evidence of improvement in literacy levels has been noted, progress has yet to be accurately measured.

Structured testing and review of the outcomes of these long-standing interventions should be used to determine the level of progress in the future.

6.4 Parents and Students' views on Reading and Writing

Of the cohort of students surveyed, 78.7% liked English. 72.5% felt they were good readers. However, 16.1% did not consider themselves to be good readers and a further 11.4% did not know. A similar percentage (72.8%) thought they were good at writing and spelling, while 16.9% did not consider themselves good and 10.3% did not know. Recent results in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) report⁹ indicate that there is no room for schools to be complacent in the area of literacy.

■ I like English ■ I am doing well at writing and spelling □ I am a good reader



⁹ For example, according to the 2009 PISA summary report *The Performance and Progress of 15-year-olds in Ireland* Ireland's overall rank in relation to reading literacy is 21st among 65 participating countries and 17th of 34 OECD countries. "...over one in six students in Ireland is estimated to have poor reading skills, with twice as many males (23.2%) as females (11.3%) in this group.

Although it is positive that 90.6% of parents believed that their children were doing well with reading, it is a matter of concern that 26.4% said their school did not encourage students to read books at home and 17.6% were not sure. Moreover, the majority of students (55.5%) said that they did not read at home. Through their JCSP literacy initiatives and libraries, schools were promoting reading at school level. Some schools were also promoting parental support to improve literacy. Examples of good practice identified included: paired reading with parents; parents having to sign journals to authenticate their child's reading; literacy support classes for parents; and in some schools, the library was used by parents for a book club. However, it was apparent that more needed to be done by some schools to involve parents in supporting their child's reading to ensure that students developed the reading habit.

6.5 Conclusion

The overall findings in relation to the quality of engagement by schools in the DEIS planning process in the context of literacy were disappointing. In the majority of schools, there was scope for development in target-setting for literacy, in the implementation of strategies and interventions to achieve the targets set and in the measurement of student achievement. Even where a good range of strategies and interventions was provided, there was little recorded evidence of meaningful progress. The findings indicate a need for schools to adopt a whole-school approach to improving literacy and for all subject teachers and departments to focus on improving literacy skills as a priority area.

7. OVERALL FINDINGS: NUMERACY

The DEIS action plan (2005) defines numeracy in terms of mathematics for everyday life while more recently, *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life* (2011) explains numeracy as “the ability to use mathematical understandings and skills to solve problems and meet demands of day-to-day living in complex social settings”. These definitions move numeracy beyond formal mathematics’ lessons, as they require that young people have the ability to think and communicate quantitatively and to recognise situations where mathematics reasoning can be applied to solve problems. Schools typically use mathematics lessons, discrete JCSP classes and learning-support withdrawal classes to focus on numeracy. The whole-school integration of numeracy across the curriculum in both junior and senior cycle was not evident in DEIS schools in this evaluation.

Findings: Numeracy

	Targets and data	Strategies and Interventions	Implementation and Impact	Progress
Strengths (significant strengths/strengths outweigh weaknesses)	22% (4)	17% (3)	17% (3)	17% (3)
Scope for development (weaknesses outweigh strengths/significant weaknesses)	78% (14)	83% (15)	83% (15))	83% (15))

7.1 Target setting and data for numeracy

The findings of the evaluation across the eighteen schools indicated a low level of engagement in planning to improve numeracy skills. Only 4 schools (22%) had strengths in setting targets for numeracy with no schools having significant strengths in this area. In some cases a school policy was beginning to be established. Even where targets had been set, these were not specific or schools had not determined timeframes for their achievement. Some good work was evident in the area of data collection, typically in relation to Maths, but

this did not always lead to effective analysis and target setting. The JCSP was noted as having a positive impact on setting and achieving targets. The following statements from inspectors provide examples of mixed practice:

One of the two targets listed in the college's DEIS Plan is incomplete. It states 'standardised score on Vernon Maths Competency test (>30) to increase to' and is therefore not measurable. The second is clear and measurable ('All students to follow ordinary level or higher level for Junior Cert as preparation for transition to senior cycle') and its achievement is reflected in the college's use of mixed-ability grouping throughout the junior cycle and the fact that only two or three students sit the foundation maths paper.

As with literacy, some good baseline data has been gathered in relation to numeracy levels among students, and includes some tracking of progress from first year to third year in the recent past. However, the level of analysis of this data is low, and the degree to which targets, measures, strategies etc have been considered in numeracy is low.

Targets have been set in numeracy around increasing student competency in this area. It is planned that a Mathematics competency test will be drawn up in this school year. There is also a target to decrease the number of students taking foundation level in Mathematics in the Junior Certificate examination. This is an appropriate numeracy target but should be reviewed to be more specific and measurable

Numeracy targets include building students' confidence in Maths and increasing the pass rate in State examinations. Again, these targets need to be more specific and measurable with baseline data available to inform progress.

The undated overall numeracy target is vague and unrealistic, however there is a specific year one target (2009/10) to improve the maths age of students in first year by six months. This is a Mathematics subject target, is not aimed at any particular cohort in the group and appears over ambitious

There was scope for development in most schools (78%) in setting targets for numeracy. In these schools targets were either too general or no targets had been set. Almost all schools lacked whole-school policies for improving numeracy levels and they were not making a distinction between Mathematics and numeracy. The following statements capture some of the issues:

The college's efforts in addressing numeracy are less developed than other areas.

... the targets in numeracy cannot always be solely based on improved grades in Mathematics and may also require a more eclectic suite of assessment tools other than just standardised tests.

The use of a differentiated criterion reference maths test, based on the primary curriculum and administered to students is applauded as a good means to ascertain numeracy competencies. If this were used to ascertain gaps in students' skill-set, a common programme devised to remediate these gaps and the tests re-administered at the end of the school year, this would provide the department with valuable data that could form a good basis for the development of numeracy provision in the school.

Students seem to be experiencing increasing numeracy difficulties as they move through junior cycle in the school.

7.2 Strategies and interventions for numeracy

Only three schools (17%) had strengths in relation to strategies for improving numeracy. In a number of instances there were no strategies at all. Where strategies and interventions existed, they were associated with Maths. More effective schools had a variety of interventions and strategies designed to meet different and graduated needs and a good

range of methods and resources were deployed. Examples of interventions used by schools included: maths puzzles and games, and initiatives such as *Flashmaster*, and *Who wants to be a Maths millionaire?* Inspectors referred specifically and positively to *Maths for Fun* (facilitated by HSCL) in a small number of schools. Some schools arranged additional lessons or held a Maths Week. Others used mixed-ability teaching, JCSP initiatives or Project Maths in their efforts to improve numeracy. The following examples of good practice were reported:

Parents are also engaged in promoting literacy and numeracy strategies for students and are encouraged to participate in in-class activities with teachers and students such as Maths for Fun.

There are some good numeracy interventions in place. Some junior cycle classes are timetabled for Mathematics periods in the library and interventions such as Mathematics games and the Nintendo Flashmaster are used by students in this area. It was reported that team-teaching is a good support in Mathematics. The school acknowledges that work on the numeracy target is in its initial stages.

The Mathematics department has documented a plan to improve numeracy levels across the school and there was clear evidence in a classroom visit that the plan is being implemented in mathematics lessons. Targets are stated in terms of general improvement and a number of strategies for their achievement are identified including the use of key maths words and the review of elementary competencies such as those involving percentages or fractions

There was scope for development in most schools (83%) in relation to numeracy strategies and interventions. However, there were early signs that some schools were beginning to think about whole-school approaches to numeracy. Some evidence of willingness to make improvements was available but the need to separate numeracy from the Mathematics department and to establish cross-curricular numeracy strategies were clear. The challenge posed by this was recognised by principals.

Objectives relating to the advancement of students' numeracy are currently to be found in different elements of the school's support programmes. In the main, the school's focus on numeracy has been through the support that students receive during learning-support lessons. However, the school is now beginning to focus its work in a whole-school manner on the area of helping students to improve their numeracy.

Data collected by the learning-support team indicate that very good progress is being made by the students in the areas of literacy and numeracy. ... However, the team now accept that the time is ripe to broaden the scope of the existing literacy and numeracy policies, particularly in relation to their role in modifying the delivery of the wider curriculum across the school.

7.3 Implementation, impact and progress of numeracy strategies

As numeracy strategies and interventions were not in place in most schools, it is not surprising that implementation and the measurement of progress made was not a strength. There were strengths in relation to both implementation and progress in only 17% of schools. Where effective practice was noted the learning-support team played an important leadership role, schools were encouraging students to take maths papers at higher levels and data were used to determine levels of progress. Examples of promoting positive attitudes to Maths, of raising expectations and of these having an impact were identified:

Although not as extensive as the range of literacy strategies, there was evidence that good progress is being made in terms of numeracy. For example, fifty percent of Junior Certificate students are now aiming towards higher-level Maths in the Junior Certificate, higher-level Maths is offered at Leaving Certificate and some JCSP students have moved from foundation to ordinary-level Maths.

There was scope for development in 83% of the schools regarding implementation of strategies and progress made towards improvement in numeracy. Overall the need to develop whole-school approaches to implementation, to ensure that all subject departments took responsibility for literacy and numeracy, to review teaching approaches, and to use data to measure progress was apparent. The following comments from inspectors suggest that schools and teachers need support and guidance in the area of improving the numeracy skills of students.

In the area of numeracy, the evidence suggests that there is considerable scope for the development of an awareness of numeracy skills and their support across the curriculum.

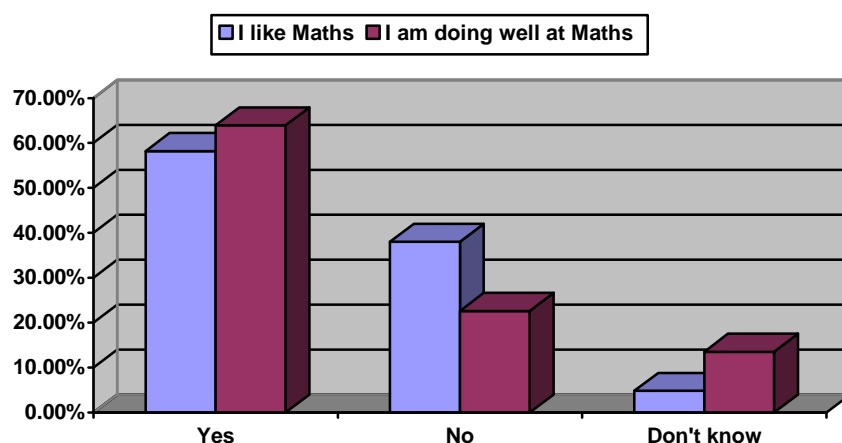
Similar to literacy, students receive numeracy support in junior cycle. However baseline data collected by the school for the period 2007–2010 indicates that an average of 31.5% of the fifth year cohort continues to have some numeracy difficulties.

The school needs to examine closely its class organisation in the junior cycle to ensure that it is meeting the needs of all groups, especially the most vulnerable. The team teaching approach should also be reviewed as a strategy to ensure that it is delivering improved outcomes in literacy, numeracy and general attainment levels in all curricular areas... .. There is no recorded evidence of improvement in the area of numeracy.

While the approach to literacy and numeracy development with JCSP classes is reportedly encouraged across all classes, the evidence of parties interviewed and the observation of lessons raised doubts about the existence of literacy and numeracy strategies across the curriculum.

7.4 Parents and Students on Maths

Both parents and schools identified numeracy competency with proficiency in Maths. In relation to Maths, 58.2% of students reported that they liked the subject but a higher percentage (64%) felt they were doing well at Maths. Parents were more positive with 75.8% stating that their children were doing well at Maths. As with reading, writing and spelling, a considerable minority of students either felt they were not doing well in Maths (22.6%) or did not know (13.5%).



It is interesting to note that while 6% more students indicated that they liked English than felt they were doing well at English as a subject, the opposite was the case in relation to Maths. In the case of Maths 5.7% fewer students indicated they liked Maths than felt they were doing well at Maths. This suggests that a small proportion of students may have had an attitudinal problem regarding Maths. It may also reflect the fact that schools were doing more to promote

reading and develop literacy and that libraries in the schools were performing a valuable function in the area of literacy. This effort needs to be replicated in the area of Maths and cross-curricular numeracy.

7.5 Conclusion: Numeracy

Overall, the findings on numeracy were disappointing. While a very small number of schools had developed strategies in relation to Maths and were using these in some cases very effectively, they had not engaged to any extent in any form of planning for improvement in numeracy across the curriculum. It was apparent that DEIS schools in this evaluation had prioritised attendance and literacy rather than numeracy in the early stages of their DEIS planning. Schools now need to prioritise numeracy when planning for improvement. All subject teachers should see themselves as teachers of numeracy as well as literacy and subject departments should take responsibility for the integration of both numeracy and literacy into planning and delivery for all subjects. The mainstreaming of Project Maths, the recent publication of *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life*, wider use of additional resources and strategies such as *Maths for Fun*, more use of information and communication technology (ICT), appropriate deployment of teachers and the development of a whole-school approach to numeracy could effect numeracy improvement in DEIS schools.

7.6 Principals' views on examination attainment, literacy and numeracy

The challenge of targeting the right students, of setting numeracy and literacy targets, of assigning resources and interventions in the best manner and ensuring the effectiveness of team teaching were concerns articulated by some principals interviewed. Issues around cross-curricular literacy and numeracy and the difficulties of implementing these approaches at whole-school level were mentioned. For example, in relation to the use of key words, not all subject teachers were engaged. Methodologies and texts were also an issue. For principals, these problems had to be set against the challenge of maintaining positive teacher-student relationships and maintaining staff morale given each school's context. Improving student attainment was a concern but many felt that the work done in areas such as attendance or on the development of homework policies supported attainment in any case.

8. OVERALL FINDINGS PARTNERSHIP

Schools supported through the DEIS action plan are expected to develop partnerships with parents and with the community, including developing links with external agencies. They are also required to develop links with other schools and colleges, for example in developing transfer programmes from primary to post-primary school or to third level colleges. The findings from the evaluation in these areas were collated under the heading of partnership. The area of partnership appears to be one that had been embraced by schools and they reported success in enhancing the role played by parents. The role of particular initiatives including HSCL and SCP were deemed to be significant in engaging parents as partners.

Findings: Partnership

	Targets and data	Strategies and Interventions	Implementation and Impact	Progress
Strengths (significant strengths/strengths outweigh weaknesses)	56% (10)	83% (15)	61% (11)	56% (10)
Scope for development (weaknesses outweigh strengths/significant weaknesses)	44% (8)	17% (3)	39% (7)	44% (8)

8.1 Target setting and data: partnership

The majority of the schools (56%) were considered by inspectors to have strengths in setting targets in the area of partnership with parents and in some instances with others. Where effective practice was observed, schools were beginning to use data to achieve better outcomes, personnel from HSCL took responsibility for setting goals and schools were making efforts to develop targets to increase levels of attendance at meetings:

The DEIS plan for the college identifies worthwhile but generic goals regarding increasing parental participation in school activities and establishing sustainable home-school-community links. There are no specific targets in the plan that allow the measurement of progress in these areas.

Primarily through the efforts of the HSCL co-ordinator, the school has developed good links with parents and very good links with outside agencies. The targets set in the area of partnership are clear with effective measures set to help in their achievement.

It should be noted that in some instances practice was deemed good in spite of targets being general rather than specific.

While targets have not been set in this area, supportive data records were provided in the wake of the in-school evaluation. These records indicated clearly the proportion of parents who attended the additional class-based meetings of parents and selected staff members that are provided to parents of first year students. The evidence of parents who met with the evaluation team indicated a very high approval of the efforts of the school to communicate with parents and to involve them in the life of the school.

Target setting in the area of partnership has been slow and for good reasons. Feedback from parent questionnaires and focus group indicates a very positive attitude to the school and the measures in existence. There are two specific targets for 2010/11: parents of potential early school leavers in first year; improving attendance at parent-teacher meetings. The school now needs to collect and analyse data in relation to the latter.

Eight schools (44%) were identified as having scope for development in the area of target setting to improve partnership with parents and others. Where scope for development was noted by inspectors, it was obvious that targets had not been set or that targets that had been set were not measurable.

Targets have been set to improve partnership with parents and others. However, some targets such as increasing parental attendance at school meetings need to be more measurable in order to assess the rate of success in encouraging parents to become more involved in the school.

No specific and measurable targets have been set and there is no measurable data available from the school to establish if the strategies and interventions to encourage partnership with parents and others are having a positive impact.

While no targets have been set in relation to partnership with parents and others, some very good strategies and interventions are in place.

8.2 Strategies and interventions for partnership

The findings indicate that schools were effective in devising strategies and interventions in the area of partnership. The vast majority of schools (83%) were considered good or very good in this area by inspectors. Strategies that appeared to be effective for partnership include those relating to good communication: awards nights, information nights, text messaging. Strategies to support parents were also noted: peer mentoring of parents, arranging transport for

parents, parents engaging in paired reading for targeted students. There were good links also with outside businesses, educational institutions and other agencies such as St Vincent de Paul (to support home tuition). The following comments give a flavour of strategies used in schools:

Parents are visibly welcome in the school. The parents' council engages in a range of supportive activities including administering the free-books scheme. Parents are also engaged in promoting literacy and numeracy strategies for students and are encouraged to participate in in-class activities with teachers and students such as Maths for Fun.

The school has developed good links with parents and outside agencies. These strong links have been forged through the hard work of the HSCL coordinator. A full time HSCL coordinator is present in the school for the last two years. Parents stated during the focus-group meeting that in many instances the HSCL coordinator would be their first contact person in the school.

Very good communication with parents was in evidence. Parent-friendly brochures for parents of first-year students have been produced.

Even in the three schools where there was scope for development regarding strategies to promote partnerships, efforts had been made to foster good communication with parents, usually through the HSCL. The following comments illustrate the schools' efforts:

A good range of strategies and activities are implemented by the HSCL personnel with a view to encouraging good communication between home and school. The action plan to implement the target to set up a 'Young People at Risk' Committee needs to incorporate focused strategies and interventions which facilitate working in partnership with parents.

The school has endeavoured to establish relationships with the diversity of parents of students at the school. This has proven to be a difficult task with a significant number of parents having little or no contact with the school...The school has developed a parents' room, which is a good initiative...The school has also provided English as an Additional Language courses for parents.

8.3 Implementation, impact and progress of partnership strategies

Schools appeared to be doing well in relation to implementing strategies and making progress regarding partnerships. A majority (61%) of the schools evaluated were good or very good at implementing their targets while 56% had strengths in measuring progress. Where good practice was noted, parents were kept informed or were involved; they were consulted about the level at which students take examinations; and reports were sent regularly to them. The HSCL and SCP personnel were a good point of contact. Evidence of measurable progress was available in a small number of schools.

Home visits are used effectively and there is an established practice within the JCSP and the Slí Eile programme that postcards are sent home to acknowledge the students' successes.

Parents sign students' homework journal nightly and weekly. Attendance at parent teacher meetings is also improving as a result of specific actions taken. Parents commented favourably on the school's open-door policy.

In the minority of cases (44%) where there was scope for development regarding partnership, a school-wide commitment to promoting positive participation by parents was not evident; data were not available to measure progress; and where information was available, it was not analysed.

They maintain records of participation and involvement by parents in various activities. However, these need to be analysed to provide information on progress in meeting targets and to inform future target setting. There are some indications that progress is being made in securing improved attendance at meetings by parents.

The school is two years into the implementation of measures to address the identified targets and the HSCL co-ordinator indicated a belief that progress was being made. The collection and collation of data would be useful in testing this belief.

8.4 Parents' views on partnership with schools

In response to questionnaires, parents' positive attitude reflected very well on schools: a very high proportion of parents (95%) stated that the school welcomed them. 92.1% of parents claimed to attend parent-teacher meetings. However, in contrast, only 48.5% of students said that someone at home came to school to talk to the teachers. This may indicate that students' response referred to engagement of their parents with the school on an individual basis. Principals stated that it was difficult to communicate with some parents and some schools had consciously set targets for improving attendance at parent teacher meetings, although data gathering in this area was somewhat patchy. Most schools required parents to sign their children's school journal (68.3%). This practice can be a simple but effective communication mechanism if used for positive feedback and not just for imparting information or negative messages. In some schools there was very good practice in this regard. However, a sizeable minority of parents stated that they did not have to sign the journals (29.9%). While a majority of parents (81.5%) stated that they received reports on students' progress, surprisingly 16.8% said they did not receive such reports. Since the vast majority of schools routinely issue written reports particularly after Christmas and summer house exams, schools should explore ways of verifying that parents receive them and can access their content, regardless of their literacy and language needs.

The role of schools in supporting parents so that they in turn can help their children in their learning was explored. 75.3% of parents surveyed stated that the school advised them how to help their child and this is commendable. However, 13.4% said they did not get advice and 11.3% did not know. While some parents might not require such advice, schools should ensure that all parents are receiving the support they need. Providing courses for parents was another means of supporting them in helping their children. A majority of parents (61.6%) stated that the school their children attended ran courses for parents. There were examples of very good practice in schools which could be extended. For example, some schools had developed texting for purposes other than alerting parents to absenteeism or school closure; they could use the same medium to notify parents of adult classes aimed at supporting their children. In view of these findings, more data about parents' specific needs in relation to supporting their children's learning should be gathered by schools themselves. A small minority of parents (21.3%) stated that someone from the school called to see them about their children. While this may seem a small number, it should be noted that this measure is used by HSCL and other personnel in a targeted way for particularly vulnerable students. Nonetheless, each school should evaluate its own progress in the area.

A minority (47.7%) of parents stated that the school had rooms designated for parents' use, while 20.8% stated the contrary. The response of 31.8% of parents who did not know points to issues around the kind of interaction that takes place and the nature of communication. Provision of a room exclusively for parents' use may be a challenge in some schools where accommodation is very limited but it may also reflect the degree of importance and status the school attaches to partnership with parents.

8.5 Principals' views on partnership with parents and others

In relation to partnership, many principals interviewed felt that a benefit of being supported through the DEIS *Action Plan* was enhanced partnership with parents. While welcoming this, the challenge of enlisting parental support and of involving parents who remained disengaged was also noted. The role of an effective HSCL was considered important in this regard.

8.6 Conclusion

Overall, findings in relation to partnership were generally positive and clearly most schools saw engagement with parents as a priority area. The use of a variety of strategies to promote parental partnership was a strength in most schools (83%). However, there was still scope for development regarding target setting and measuring progress in slightly less than half the schools (44%). Parental responses to questionnaires indicated that the majority of parents felt welcomed in the school, they agreed that they were consulted regarding the education of their children and many considered that the school supported them in helping their own children's learning.

9 SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

The evaluation findings indicate that the sample schools are very committed to their students and many of the inspectors' records of evaluation praised the dedication of teaching staff and the variety of strategies and interventions that are provided. This is corroborated in surveys of students and parents. Principals reported that one of the benefits accruing to schools due to DEIS was improved teamwork among teachers in schools. This positive benefit should assist future planning in the schools.

The following summary provides an overview of the findings of the evaluation in the 18 schools.

Planning processes: The stage of DEIS planning (year one, two, three) and choice of DEIS themes on which to focus varied from school to school and these are critical factors in relation to the degree of impact made to date and to the measurement of progress. At the time of the evaluation post-primary schools were at a very early stage in the DEIS planning process and in some schools, the 2009/10 academic year was the first in the three-year planning cycle.

The evaluation findings indicate that there was scope for development in all of the planning processes across all DEIS themes. In extreme cases, there had been little or no engagement in planning. For example, in a small minority of schools there was no DEIS plan and no evidence of concerted planning in a systematic way was provided despite it being a clear requirement of DEIS funding that such plans were in place. The weakest aspects of the planning process identified were: target setting (targets did not exist or were not SMART that is, specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time bound); poor or no collection of data; little or no analysis of data or evaluation at the beginning and end of the planning process.

In relation to the DEIS themes, schools appear to have concentrated initial planning efforts on attendance and retention and some aspects of progression. These three areas are closely linked and overlap. The availability of the School Completion Programme (SCP) and home-school-community liaison (HSCL) designated personnel and existing structures such as year heads and tutors to undertake responsibility in these areas may have influenced the decision to engage in planning for improvement in these areas. All schools in the sample had support from both the HSCL and the SCP at the time of the evaluation.

Attendance: While a majority of schools had good or very good strategies for encouraging attendance, effective target setting to improve attendance was evident in less than half the schools. Because schools either did not have accurate records to use as baseline data or did not analyse data that were available, their ability to measure progress was limited. The fact that only 7 of the 18 schools reported overall improvement in attendance rates and that progress was modest in some of these points to the need for greater focus on this important aspect of planning for improvement. The findings suggest that schools did not explore or analyse links that might exist between suspension and attendance. Furthermore, lack of progress, as reported by schools, in improving attendance for those who are absent for more than twenty days indicates the need to place greater focus on this area. Supports available through NEWB should be explored by school management in this regard.

Retention: The theme of retention was addressed effectively by the majority of schools. Particular supports, notably SCP, HSCL and NBSS, and specific programmes such as the

JCSP, LCA and LCVP, were deemed helpful in improving retention. Where good practice was noted, schools had integrated the work of various agencies and had well-developed lines of communication with parents. However, the role of activities such as breakfast clubs and after-school activities require further investigation by both school personnel and personnel from the support programmes, to ensure that they are targeted at the students who need them. Participation rates in these activities should be continually monitored by schools and their role in achieving their intended purpose should be evaluated. Finally, the impact of the lack of availability of activities in the event of SCP personnel being on leave needs to be investigated.

Progression: The overall findings in relation to planning processes for progression from primary to junior cycle, from junior to senior cycle and to further education or employment were mixed. A majority of schools had effective strategies and about half reported that they had made progress. Examples of good practice included good transfer and access programmes and effective SCP and HSCL activities. However, schools need to use their planning processes to ensure that all students are encouraged to progress as far as possible in the education system. Issues to be addressed include: the availability of sufficient places for all targeted students in homework clubs; the provision of a full curriculum for all students; and ensuring that all students have a full weekly timetable. In view of the high expectations expressed in surveys by both students and parents regarding completing LC and progressing to third level, schools should track students progression from junior to senior cycle and on to third level.

Examination attainment: Overall findings regarding planning processes to improve examination attainment were disappointing. While half the schools had effective strategies in this area, only 4 schools (22%) had set suitable targets and 5 had successfully implemented and made progress in this area. The evaluation indicated that assessment or screening tests used by schools were not always fit for purpose. It was also evident that schools did not analyse and use available data either at subject department or at whole-school level. The capacity or the leadership to engage in systematic analysis of data and to use this as a basis for setting targets appears to be lacking in many schools. Subject departments that showed greater awareness of target setting and analysis of examination results were more likely to be cohesive in relation to implementing strategies and achieving goals such as reducing numbers taking foundation level papers in state examinations or improving learning outcomes.

Literacy: The evaluation highlighted shortcomings in the area of planning for improved literacy. Good or very good target setting and strategies for improving literacy were apparent in only 7 of the 18 schools (39%), while evidence of measuring progress in this area was available in only 6 schools. Overall the findings indicate little by way of a whole-school approach to literacy and point to a need for effective cross-curricular strategies that extend beyond the English and special educational needs settings. Where schools focused on literacy, writing and reading competence only were considered and only in very exceptional cases was there any emphasis on oral literacy. Structured literacy testing was not a feature of practice in the schools and where standardised tests had been used as part of schools' entry procedures, re-testing did not occur.

These findings draw attention to the importance of defining literacy requirements across the curriculum in post-primary schools. They highlight a need to consider literacy levels of particular groups of students on entry and to track the progress made from year to year by these students. They also draw attention to the need for the system to ensure that suitable tests are available to enable schools to track and compare literacy progress with national norms. These issues have become themes in the literacy and numeracy strategy, *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life*, which has been published since the collection of data for this evaluation.

A focus on digital literacy was not apparent in any of the schools. Student use of information and communication technology (ICT) relates to all aspects of learning. A large minority of surveyed students (41.1%) stated that they did not often use computers in school and a further 3.3% did not know. A comparable question was asked of the generality of students

surveyed at the time of the DEIS evaluation in the course of WSE-MLL conducted nationally. In this case, 30% said they used computers in class, 3% did not know and 57% did not. It is positive that more students in DEIS schools appear to use ICT than those nationally in the same period but clearly there is no room for complacency. It may also reflect the fact that there may be a greater proportion of students with additional learning needs in DEIS schools and this cohort may use computers more regularly than those in mainstream classes.¹⁰

Numeracy: The findings of the evaluation across the 18 schools indicate a low level of engagement in planning processes to improve numeracy attainment. Only 4 schools (22%) had strengths in the area of target setting and only 3 had effective strategies and were measuring progress. Typically, schools prioritise literacy over numeracy when engaging in planning processes. Where effective target setting was noted, the JCSP was credited with having a positive impact but even in these cases, data collection did not always lead to effective analysis. Schools in the evaluation appeared to identify numeracy with proficiency in Mathematics; they had not developed a shared understanding of numeracy across the curriculum. Thus there was no integrated approach to planning and delivery.

It is apparent that post-primary schools are beginning to think about whole-school approaches to numeracy and there is some evidence of willingness to make improvements. However, schools require guidance to enable them to see that numeracy is broader than the school's Mathematics department and to support them in planning to establish cross-curricular numeracy strategies. The need to make available at system level suitable tests in the area of numeracy should also be explored.

Partnership:

The area of partnership is one that schools appeared to have embraced and evaluation findings suggest that schools have engaged positively in implementing interventions to improve partnership with parents and the community. 10 of the 18 schools had strengths in relation to target setting and measuring progress. A majority of the schools (15) had effective strategies with regard to improving communication, supporting parents and encouraging them to become involved in learning activities. Good links were also established with agencies outside the school. In many cases, the HSCL and SCP personnel were a good point of contact between the school and parents. However, schools are still at an early stage in using data and measuring progress made in improving partnerships with parents and the school community. Little evidence of measurable progress was available except in a small number of areas such as JCSP strategies and improved attendance at parent-teacher meetings.

10. OVERALL CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

10.1 Effectiveness of DEIS planning processes

- Overall, the findings from this evaluation indicate that a systematic planning process for school improvement, which was envisaged in DEIS schools, is not yet embedded in practice in post-primary schools. The potential of such planning to impact on outcomes has therefore not been achieved. The requirement on DEIS post-primary schools to engage in a process of target setting, implementation of appropriate strategies to achieve targets, and reviewing progress made in light of targets set should continue. This need has been strengthened in the requirement of the literacy

¹⁰ The Educational Research Centre's (ERC) preliminary summary of the PISA digital literacy tests seems to point in this direction. See *Digital Reading Literacy in the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA 2009) Summary of Results for Ireland*, ERC, June 28, 2011. Reference on page 10, "In Ireland, the relationship between levels of computer usage at school and performance on digital reading is strong, though students reporting medium usage levels perform at a higher level than those reporting high levels. In the case of school-related activities, this may reflect greater use of computers by less-able students, perhaps in learning support contexts."

and numeracy strategy that all schools must engage in effective school self-evaluation and have a school improvement plan in place by the end of 2013.

- Early indications suggest that engaging in the planning process that is expected in DEIS schools can lead to improvement. In schools where effective target-setting had been undertaken in the context of specific DEIS themes, there was evidence of visible progress being made. Inspectors found that schools which had effective leadership, had good planning structures and communication mechanisms and engaged the whole staff in a collaborative process were effective at implementing strategies and in achieving impact. However, only a minority of schools were sufficiently established in the planning process to be in a position to measure and report on progress effectively.
- The DEIS planning process undertaken by post-primary schools in this evaluation was frequently viewed as discrete and separate from ongoing school development planning processes. An integrated approach to both planning and implementation across all DEIS themes has considerable scope for development. There is a perception that there are two processes: school development planning and DEIS planning which is seen as an “add-on” and an additional burden in many instances. Grounding such planning processes within an overall school development planning and school self evaluation framework would result in a more cohesive and integrated approach to school improvement. All schools, including those supported through the DEIS action plan, should use the DEIS or a similar planning framework when devising their school improvement plan.
- The capacity of schools to engage in meaningful school self evaluation and whole-school planning for improvement varies despite the supports provided to schools by the support services. Some schools are more effective at developing planning structures and appointing planning teams than others. There is a clear need for guidance to be provided at system level to schools in order to improve their DEIS planning at whole-school level. The necessary guidance should be provided through the Inspectorate, the support services and the education centre network to enable schools to achieve the full potential of the planning processes advocated for DEIS schools. The recent development of draft school self-evaluation guidelines by the Inspectorate for all schools is a first step in this process. Schools need to be supported by the Inspectorate and by the support services to use these guidelines to engage in robust school self-evaluation and to enable them to develop school improvement plans as envisaged in the national literacy and numeracy strategy.
- The importance of allocating designated time for DEIS planning is highlighted in the evaluation but is seen as a challenge in schools. In the context of the Croke Park agreement, all schools, including DEIS schools, should allocate discrete time for school self-evaluation and whole-school planning for improvement. The provision of discrete time for DEIS planning should ensure that schools systematically track progress and produce formal written reviews at regular intervals.

10.2 Target setting and data analysis

- This evaluation identified serious difficulties in schools with regard to setting SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time bound) targets. Frequently schools did not engage in a systematic way in setting targets for improvement. Where targets had been set, they were often vague, not based on robust data analysis, or not related to relevant groups of students. Additionally, the setting of targets at whole-school level was not apparent in many schools. Schools should set targets based on reliable data and should record progress made on targets set for any one year, as well as progress made on overall targets set in the DEIS three-year plan. Support services should provide professional development in this area for principals, deputy principals and teachers.

- The collection, analysis and use of data are identified as a particular weakness in the evaluation. While the findings provide evidence that a small number of schools gather specific, measurable data in areas such as attendance, retention and attendance at parent-teacher meetings, the potential to use data in a meaningful way has not been exploited in most schools. Schools should make more active efforts to elicit the views of parents and students in data gathering and should incorporate their views into planning processes. Furthermore, data available on attendance and retention through NEWB could be used to make comparisons with national levels of attendance and retention.
- Findings in relation to examination attainment indicate that post-primary schools are not yet engaging in meaningful data collection in relation to outcomes for students. Although not the specific focus of this evaluation, evidence of systematic attention to learning outcomes in subject areas was not provided. For examples inspectors reported that there was greater scope for the use of formative assessment. Schools need to take note of the guidance in relation to assessment available on the NCCA website.
- It is apparent that schools are not exploiting fully data related to learning outcomes available at national level. Data available on state examination results through the State Examinations Commission (SEC) provide schools with the potential not only to track results achieved by their own students from year to year, but also to compare attainment levels in their schools with standards at national level. A systematic approach at subject department level and at whole-school level to analysing a school's own results in each subject and comparing these with national statistics needs to be encouraged to assist schools in identifying current weaknesses, raising expectations and improving outcomes.
- The use of standardised tests, where appropriate, to assess and compare levels of attainment in literacy and numeracy was not fully developed in schools in this evaluation. Where such tests were used, these were not always fit for purpose. The intention within the literacy and numeracy strategy of developing literacy and numeracy tests at system level that will provide schools with the capacity to compare attainment levels in their school with national standards is welcome in this regard.
- To improve the capacity within schools to use data purposefully to set appropriate targets, discrete guidance and support in the area of data collection and analysis should be provided as a priority. Provision of practical assistance such as ICT tools and templates to assist focused data gathering and analysis should be developed at system level and provided to schools. Such assistance and tools should be provided for all schools in the context of school self evaluation.

10.3 *Planning and coordination of strategies*

- There is evidence from this evaluation that schools focus attention positively on strategies and interventions across a number of the DEIS themes. In some cases these strategies existed in the school prior to the introduction of DEIS and were initiated by the school. Taking responsibility for initiating their own strategies and solutions in the context of DEIS planning represents a developmental approach which should be encouraged.
- Schools in the evaluation used a range of programmes effectively to meet the learning needs of their students. Curricular programmes such as the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) and JCSP were positive aspects of provision. Where JCSP libraries were available they were contributing positively to the work of the school. However, there was evidence of good practice also in schools without such a resource. The role played by these programmes in improving outcomes in terms of

DEIS themes should become part of the school's planning and should be included in planning documents.

- Schools should ensure that all interventions are selected to achieve specific targets for identified groups of students. All interventions should be designed to improve the learning outcomes or other identified needs of students. However, participation in interventions should not prevent students from participating fully in regular timetabled lessons across the full range of subjects.
- The findings indicate that services provided by SCP, HSCL, NBSS and guidance programmes were effectively implemented and well used by some schools. However, the challenge for schools is to integrate existing strategies and interventions into the DEIS planning framework rather than see each as a stand-alone initiative or support. There was evidence of a lack of connectedness between the strategies and the school's overall plan for improvement or the DEIS plan. In some cases, this led to strategies used being inappropriate.
- There was evidence to suggest that overlap exists in current provision of services to post-primary schools. For example, in a number of schools responsibility in the area of attendance, retention and progression was shared between personnel from SCP and HSCL. Possible overlap between the role of NEWB, HSCL and SCP personnel was identified. The promotion of greater integration of all services within the DEIS planning framework is encouraged. It is acknowledged that the inclusion of HSCL and SCP services under NEWB management in the recent past is a positive development. In this context, it is timely to identify and articulate the specific duties attached to each service to ensure clarity of purpose and to avoid duplication.

10.4 Responsibility and Accountability

- Effective leadership is crucial if schools are to engage in successful whole-school planning for improvement. The attitude and behaviours of school leaders is of considerable importance in all aspects of the planning process. Lack of co-ordination and leadership to oversee the process results in schools experiencing limited or no success. Some schools in the evaluation reported that resource constraints had impacted on capacity. Duties associated with DEIS co-ordination and planning should be carefully assigned. Responsibility for planning and implementation should be devolved to individuals for each of the DEIS themes. These roles should be clearly defined and documented. Reporting mechanisms should be established.
- The role and responsibility of boards of management, in the context of DEIS planning and overall school improvement needs to be clearly understood. All aspects of school plans, including school improvement plans and DEIS planning, should be ratified by the board. Boards should take responsibility for reporting progress on targets to parents as part of the school's provision of an annual report. Guidance should be developed at system level and disseminated to all boards to enable them to support planning processes effectively.
- The effectiveness of key personnel from supports such as HSCL, SCP, guidance and learning support is an important factor in successful planning in DEIS schools. Ensuring quality and evaluating effectiveness should be a key aspect of provision of activities. School management should ensure that the activity is achieving its intended purpose and is focused on the needs of students in the target group. The absence or lack of replacement of key personnel in some schools in the evaluation resulted in the loss of interventions and activities for students. The possibility of funding such activities in the absence of such personnel should be explored.
- Schools should prioritise literacy, numeracy, and examination attainment in all aspects of DEIS planning. The raising of expectations is the responsibility of each individual teacher irrespective of subject specialism, as is the implementation of

numeracy and literacy whole-school policies and practice. The role and function of subject departments in all aspects of planning needs to be developed in relation to DEIS.

- It is important that all DEIS schools recognise and accept responsibility for engaging with the DEIS planning process. There should be more accountability on the part of schools in relation to DEIS. Issues related to data gathering and measurement of progress, and ongoing monitoring and evaluation of the DEIS planning process should be addressed. Leadership at all levels in the school is important in this regard. At system level, the accountability expectations regarding the requirement to engage in the DEIS planning should be clarified. Lines of accountability through to system level should be developed to provide a clear overview of the work of DEIS schools with regard to bringing about improvements in students learning.
- The evaluation highlights the need to provide training in the area of planning processes for school personnel. In the context of the literacy and numeracy strategy, the support services have already begun to provide training for school leaders in all schools. Such training should be continued and should be expanded to include boards of management and teachers.
- The findings from the evaluation indicate that some schools had not engaged in the planning processes that were expected in DEIS schools. This draws attention to the need for ongoing monitoring of planning for improvement in schools at system level. The Inspectorate is currently implementing such evaluations in DEIS schools and will need to include similar evaluation for all schools in its inspection programme, as planning for improvement is required as part of the literacy and numeracy strategy.

Appendix 1: Guide to quality descriptors

Ratings	Targets and data	Interventions and strategies	Implementation and impact	Progress
Significant strengths	School has used available data very effectively to identify specific areas as priorities for improvement and development. Realistic and achievable targets have been set. Roles and responsibility for all targets have been suitably assigned. Appropriate timescale and success criteria have been named.	All interventions and strategies offered are assessed to ascertain their suitability to the target groups or school. Suitable whole-school or relevant interventions or strategies are identified and named for all or targeted students. All staff are aware of interventions and strategies and are familiar with their aims and purpose. Identified strategies and interventions are fit for purpose and very relevant to school population.	Appropriate CPD is provided for all relevant staff to ensure successful implementation of intervention or strategy and achievement of targets. There is evidence of a whole-school focus on achievement of targets and the implementation of interventions. Agreed strategies and interventions are familiar to all teachers, students and other relevant personnel and are effectively implemented. There is evidence of very good use of data to identify baseline measures and to determine success.	All relevant staff are familiar with how progress will be measured. Data is available and well used in measuring progress made towards targets. Expertise in data analysis is available and well used in the school or CPD had been provided in this regard. There is clear evidence of progress made in targeted area or targets have been reviewed in light of experience and more realistic targets set. All relevant staff are well informed about whole-school progress, including revised targets, in relation to targets, interventions or strategies.
Strengths outweigh weaknesses	Priorities have been identified and many are based on available data. Targets are realistic. Success criteria are available for most targets. Some roles have been assigned and timescales are included for most targets.	Relevant interventions and strategies have been identified or the school refers to the whole-school strategic plan when accepting interventions. Most staff are familiar with interventions and strategies. Strategies and interventions relevant to some target groups have been identified.	CPD has been provided to ensure implementation of most interventions. There is a whole-school approach to most interventions and strategies. Most relevant personnel are familiar with targets and strategies and these are clear to many students and parents. Data is used effectively in some instances for measuring progress. Interventions are well implemented and impact is checked at some class or group levels.	Some staff, including principal, are familiar with success criteria for set targets. Levels of progress are measured, noted and familiar to relevant personnel in almost all cases. Some students and parents are aware of their own levels of progress in targeted areas. Levels of progress are used to inform future planning and to alter targets if necessary.
Weaknesses outweigh strengths	Targets are not clear either because they have not been set or they are vague. Data are not used or not available and therefore targets are unrealistic. Little attention has been given to roles and responsibility. Only the three year timescale has been set but no success criteria have been identified.	School has too many or too few interventions and strategies to serve the needs of targeted groups or all students. Most staff are not familiar with specific purpose of each intervention and strategy. Principal and senior management have no overview of all interventions and strategies in use in the school.	Interventions and strategies are not clearly understood and therefore not correctly or appropriately implemented. Interventions and strategies are not serving the needs of targeted groups. Only specific teachers or personnel (e.g. SEN, SCP) are implementing strategy intended as a whole-school strategy. Little or no attention is paid to impact of strategy or achievement of target.	There is little evidence of targets being measured or success criteria being applied. Any progress made is only familiar to teaching staff directly involved or those most closely involved. Progress on targets is not a whole-school issue. Principal and senior management are not familiar with progress made or with measures used to ascertain progress.
Significant weaknesses	Broad targets only (as listed for DEIS) or no targets have been set or identified. Data are not used or analysed, no named person has responsibility for monitoring implementation, and no timescales have been set.	Teachers use interventions and strategies to suit their own purpose or there is no evidence of any specific strategies for priority areas or target groups. Interventions are not being applied as required.	There is no evidence of strategies in classrooms of other settings (SCP, SEN, HSCL) to overcome elements of educational disadvantage associated with DEIS targets or interventions. Targeted groups are not identified by individual teachers. Little or no attention is paid to progress in any areas identified in the DEIS action plan.	No record or evidence of any progress in areas prioritised or any area identified in the DEIS action plan. Targets for interventions are not known or identified. No progress has been made on any targets or with any interventions and yet no revised targets have been identified.

