



# Looking at Action Planning for Improvement in DEIS Primary Schools

Inspectorate Evaluation Studies



Promoting the Quality of Learning

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# CHAPTER 1: THE DEIS ACTION PLAN AND DEIS EVALUATIONS

## 1.1 An overview of the DEIS action plan

### Introduction

The DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) action plan was launched in 2005 by the Department of Education and Skills. It 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 is to ensure that the educational needs of children and young people from disadvantaged communities are met. To this end, it sought a more integrated, co-ordinated, and effective delivery of the full range of school-based educational inclusion measures. At its core is a standardised system for identifying and regularly reviewing levels of disadvantage, and an integrated *School Support Programme (SSP)* that brings together and builds upon existing interventions for schools. The interventions include 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 educational disadvantage, targeted measures to tackle problems of literacy and numeracy, and measures to enhance pupil attendance, 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.

In 2009 the remit of the National Educational Welfare Board (NEWB) was expanded to include responsibility for the integration of the HSCL Scheme, the School Completion Programme (SCP) and the National Educational Welfare Service (EWS). Since June 2011 the former National Educational Welfare Board, and its integrated services fall within the policy remit of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs with operational responsibility for the Educational Welfare Service part of the remit of the Child and Family Agency (Tusla) since its establishment in January 2014. The Department of Education and Skills retains responsibility for the allocation of HSCL coordinators in schools.

### Additional supports for DEIS schools

Primary schools participating in DEIS receive significant additional supports and resources including additional staffing for the most disadvantaged schools 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. Where the level of disadvantage is greatest, primary schools are classified as participating in Urban Band 1 of DEIS and these schools receive the highest level of supports and resources, including additional teaching resources. A dedicated staffing schedule for DEIS Band 1

schools giving a pupil teacher ratio (PTR) of 20:1 in junior schools, 22:1 in vertical<sup>1</sup> schools and 24:1 in senior schools was developed in 2012 to streamline the allocations process. This compares very favourably with the current mainstream PTR of 28:1. The remaining participating primary schools also receive significant levels of supports and resources and are classified as participating in Urban Band 2 of DEIS.

### **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 pupils, 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 for improvement focusing on the following areas: attendance, retention, progression, literacy and numeracy, and partnerships with parents and others. Within this framework, participating schools are responsible for tailoring their own action planning to meet the specific needs of their pupils. Progress in the implementation of these action plans should be kept under review and adjusted in light of experience.

A 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 for improvement, schools 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, are 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 individual planning for teaching and learning.

## **1.2 The DEIS evaluation framework**

### **DEIS evaluations 2010-2014**

The Educational Research Centre (ERC) was commissioned in 2007 by the Department of Education and Skills to conduct an evaluation of the School Support Programme in primary and post-primary schools. This work is ongoing and has led to a number of reports, which are available on the ERC website. Some of the ERC findings are referred to in the present report and have informed some of its recommendations.

In 2010, the Inspectorate of the Department of Education and Skills undertook an evaluation of school-based action planning processes in DEIS band 1 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 for improvement; to assess the quality of the action plans; and to establish the extent to which the schools could indicate the impact of the action plans on the learning outcomes for pupils. The findings of the evaluation were compiled and published in *An Evaluation of Planning Processes in DEIS Primary Schools*.<sup>2</sup>

Further evaluations were conducted in DEIS Band 1 primary schools in 2011 and 2014. In total, forty-four DEIS evaluations have now taken place in primary schools; eighteen in 2010, sixteen in 2011 and ten in 2014. They varied in size from schools with fewer than 100 pupils enrolled to schools with an enrolment of over 680 pupils. A range of school types was included:

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<sup>1</sup> Vertical schools contain classes from junior infants to 6<sup>th</sup> class

<sup>2</sup> Department of Education and Skills (2011): *An Evaluation of Planning Processes in DEIS Primary Schools*

vertical co-educational and single gender schools along with junior<sup>3</sup> and senior<sup>4</sup> coeducational and single gender schools. The total enrolment of the forty-four schools was 11,595 and the number of teaching posts allocated to the schools was, in total, 1049. This report presents the findings from all forty-four evaluations.

### **Focus of the evaluations – DEIS themes and DEIS action planning for improvement**

The evaluations focused on schools' action planning processes with regard to each of the following themes:

- **Attendance**  
Given the fundamental importance of attendance to pupils' progress and attainment, schools are required to look at patterns of full-day absences, part-day absences, late arrival at school, and the rate of suspensions.
- **Retention**  
The theme of retention focuses on the importance of keeping children in school, identifying those at risk of early leaving, and taking action to reduce or eliminate factors that cause pupils to drop out.
- **Progression**  
Progression is very closely linked to attendance and retention. It puts a spotlight on the key moves from one stage of education to the next: in this instance from primary to post-primary.
- **Literacy**  
Improvements in literacy and numeracy skills have been a key objective of the DEIS action plan from the beginning. The Department's national literacy and numeracy strategy<sup>5</sup> sets out a very broad definition of literacy that includes 'the ability to use and understand spoken language, print, writing, and digital media'.
- **Numeracy**  
The national literacy and numeracy strategy offers a broad definition of numeracy: 'the ability to use mathematical understanding and skills to solve problems and meet the demands of day-to-day living in complex social settings'.
- **Partnership with parents and others**  
The DEIS action plan supports schools to develop partnerships with parents and with the community. Schools are also expected to develop links with other schools, for example in transfer programmes from primary to post-primary school.

Devising the cyclical plans is only part of the planning process. Of equal importance is the attention the school gives to the implementation, review and adjustment of plans in light of its review and of the pupils' changing priority educational needs. Each of the themes above was examined by inspectors with reference to the quality of the schools' action planning for improvement with regard to the following key aspects:

- **Target-setting**  
Setting targets is an essential element of effective DEIS planning. Typically, target-setting involves gathering data and evidence, analysing it, and using the information to formulate targets that are SMART: specific, measurable, attainable, realistic, and time-bound.

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<sup>3</sup>typically from junior infants to 2<sup>nd</sup> class

<sup>4</sup>typically from 3<sup>rd</sup>- 6<sup>th</sup> class

<sup>5</sup> Department of Education and Skills, (2011) *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life*

- **Selection of strategies**

Once targets are set, the focus of planning is on how the targets will be attained. Where planning is effective, the process shows clear links between target-setting and the strategies and interventions selected to achieve the targets set.

- **Implementation of strategies**

In this aspect of the planning process, the focus is on how the strategies and interventions selected are put into practice. Where planning is effective, those involved directly in implementation understand the purpose of each strategy, and a whole-school approach to implementation is evident.

- **Impact and progress**

The DEIS planning process requires schools to monitor the effectiveness of the strategies they are implementing. Schools should be able to show that outcomes have improved, or that they have adjusted targets or strategies having reviewed the progress made.

The support services engaged with schools to support them in the practical implementation of planning processes in individual DEIS schools.

### **DEIS evaluation criteria and quality continuum**

In judging the quality of schools' action planning for improvement in the context of each DEIS theme, inspectors used a four-point quality continuum. This involved assigning one of the following quality descriptors to each aspect of the action planning process (target-setting, selection and implementation of strategies and interventions, progress) being evaluated:

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

The DEIS evaluation criteria used by inspectors, in the form of quality descriptors are given in *Appendix 1*.

In compiling this report, quantitative terms were used to illustrate percentages, as follows:

<b>Quantitative terms</b>	<b>Percentage of occurrence</b>
Almost all	>90
Most	75 – 90
Majority	50 – 74
Fewer than half	25 – 49
A small number	16 – 24
A few	Up to 15

### **Evaluation activities**

The evaluation in each school was undertaken by two inspectors over the course of one week. Three days were allocated to school-based evaluation activities during which data relevant to various aspects of the DEIS action planning for improvement in the school was collected. Following the evaluation activities, the inspectors prepared and delivered feedback on their findings to the school.

Information was collected by means of the following activities:

- Review of a school information form completed by the principal of each school
- Interviews with the school principal
- Meetings with teachers and others relevant school and support personnel

- Meetings with focus groups of parents
- Questionnaires for the pupils in sixth class
- Questionnaires for the parents of pupils in second and sixth class
- Observation of teaching in a range of settings
- Observation of pupils' learning (including their learning through literacy and numeracy interventions in a range of learning settings in the school)
- Observation of other activities during and after school (for example, breakfast clubs and homework clubs)
- Review of school documents and records (including the school's DEIS action plan, plans prepared by individual teachers, attendance records, and records of assessment including standardised test results)
- Inspection of pupils' work

Following their analysis of the data and information collected in individual schools, the inspectors prepared a draft report that set out the key findings with regard to the school's engagement in DEIS action planning in the context of the DEIS themes. The positive features of the DEIS action planning process in each school were identified as were aspects of the process that required development in the school.

The inspectors held a meeting with the principal and a group of teachers with particular responsibilities for DEIS action planning in order to provide feedback and to discuss the findings. Subsequently, each school received a draft report. Following the procedures outlined in *Publication of School Reports* (Inspectorate 2006), each school was invited to inform the Inspectorate of any errors of fact in the draft record. The written reports were then issued to the schools and each school was provided with an opportunity to respond.

In the preparation of this composite report, the following sources of evidence were used:

- the forty-four individual evaluation reports themselves
- the collated findings relating to strengths and weaknesses
- the responses to the pupil questionnaires (1,382)
- the responses to the parent questionnaires (1,485)
- data from various DEIS-related reports published by the Department and other agencies.



## CHAPTER 2: FINDINGS OF DEIS EVALUATIONS 2010 – 2014

### 2.1 Overview of action planning for improvement in the forty-four schools

#### 2.1.1 Strengths and weaknesses in DEIS action planning

Schools participating in DEIS are required to plan for improvement in each DEIS theme. DEIS action planning in the forty-four schools was evaluated by looking at four linked aspects of planning:

- target-setting
- selection of strategies
- implementation of strategies
- impact and progress

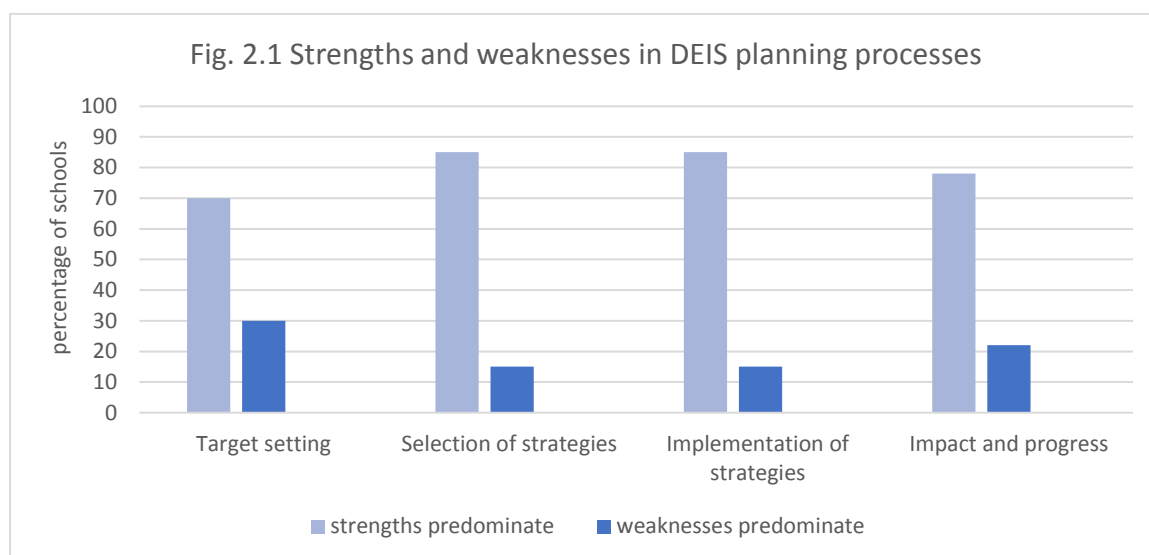


Figure 2.1 illustrates the findings in relation to the schools' action planning for improvement. While the evaluations revealed strengths and weaknesses in the four aspects of action planning in the forty-four schools, the overall picture is very positive. In a pattern that is repeated for each of the themes, the strongest aspects of action planning related to the selection of strategies (85%) and implementation of strategies (85%). Significantly more instances of strong than weak practice were noted in target setting in the majority of schools (70%). However, weaknesses were found in this critical aspect of planning in 30% of schools. Most schools (78%) monitor the impact of strategies and progress towards reaching targets effectively. However, weaknesses were found in 22% of the schools. It is evident that schools are more successful in the intermediate stages of the process than in the initial and final stages.

For DEIS action planning to be effective, a number of elements are necessary. As with any organisational process, effective leadership is important. The commitment of all members of staff to the process and to the implementation of agreed actions is crucial. A whole-school approach to the selection and implementation of interventions and strategies should be adopted. The following is an example of a school where these necessary elements are present:

*Under the leadership of an effective principal, a culture of school self-evaluation has been successfully established in the school. Discussions on the effectiveness of the DEIS plan feature at staff meetings. The commitment of all school staff to engaging in initiatives which benefit pupils and the school community is recognised and commended (2011).*

Setting targets based on an analysis of relevant data is a fundamental element of DEIS action planning for improvement. It is heartening to note that most of the schools evaluated (70%) ensure that targets are specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time-bound (SMART). These schools also select and implement strategies that are appropriately linked to the targets:

*Target setting in all areas is very effective. The whole-school implementation of strategies to address these targets is informed by identified needs and is monitored on an on-going basis. The reflective and critical approach in the school to self-evaluation is a noteworthy strength (2011).*

Even though the overall picture regarding target setting is positive, there are recommendations relating to targets in approximately half of the individual school reports. Some reports identify a lack of the basic features of good target setting:

*It is important that targets be laid out in terms of specific measurable learning outcomes for all pupils (2010).*

*It is recommended that the school formulate targets that are specific, measurable, attainable, realistic, and time bound for each of the thematic areas in DEIS (2011).*

In other cases, the formulation of targets which are more closely linked to available data is recommended:

*The use of school-based data in the identification of specific, realistic and time-bound targets is advised (2010).*

*It is recommended that all targets in the DEIS plan be clearly linked to baseline data available in the school and expressed in specific, measurable, attainable, realistic and time-bound (SMART) terms (2014).*

The evaluations identified strengths in most schools in relation to selecting and implementing an appropriate range of strategies across the various DEIS themes. The following statements illustrate schools' positive practices:

*The school has highly effective strategies and interventions in place to promote attendance and progression, and to enhance pupil attainment particularly in the areas of literacy and numeracy. A range of successful initiatives to support parental involvement in the life of the school has been implemented (2010).*

*The school has established effective strategies and intervention initiatives in respect of each DEIS theme. These are being implemented consistently (2011).*

*The school's focus on ensuring that all interventions and strategies are clearly aimed at improving learning outcomes for pupils is lauded (2014).*

While the evaluations identified weaknesses in the quality of target setting practices in 30% of the schools, there is evidence that, overall, DEIS action planning is impacting positively on outcomes in primary schools. The following provides an example of good practice in relation to the progress made on achieving one school's targets:

*A whole-school approach is evident in the application of strategies relating to literacy, numeracy and attendance. Data related to these areas is monitored closely by the relevant co-ordinators and outcomes are discussed at meetings. The significant*

*successes of this school in the context of DEIS are the steady improvement in literacy, the overall increase in attendance and enhanced partnership with parents (2010).*

Terms such as ‘significant progress’ and ‘observable and measurable progress’ are used to describe the overall sense of the impact of DEIS action planning. It is worth noting, however, that in most schools, progress is evident in many, but not all, of the DEIS themes. The following comment, however, indicates that progress in all areas is possible and has been achieved:

*Definite, measurable and significant progress has been made by the school with regard to all of the areas prioritised by it in its DEIS plan. In that context, the school’s achievements with regard to literacy and mathematics are particularly noteworthy (2010).*

Most schools (78%) monitor the impact of agreed strategies effectively. Monitoring practices include the provision of reports to staff meetings and detailed and systematic analysis of learning outcomes including the results of standardised tests and teacher-designed tests. Where weaknesses are noted, schools are advised to link monitoring practices with the targets set. For example, in one school it is recommended that:

*....under the leadership of the principal, regular meetings (should be) held with the co-ordinators of the DEIS plan to monitor the implementation of agreed targets for improvement and the adjusting of targets where necessary (2014).*

### **2.1.2 Conclusions**

The overall situation relating to action planning for improvement in DEIS primary schools is positive. It is evident that schools have engaged purposefully and beneficially with the planning process and that this is yielding benefits for the pupils. The most positive elements of the planning process at primary level are the selection and implementation of strategies. The areas of greatest challenge for schools are the setting of SMART targets for improvement and the monitoring of impact and progress made.

What most schools are doing well:

- Selecting appropriate strategies across the DEIS themes
- Implementing these strategies effectively

What schools could do better

- Improve target setting practices
- Improve monitoring practices

## **2.2 The findings on planning processes for the DEIS themes**

This section sets out the findings of the evaluations for each DEIS planning theme. The section on each theme begins with a short account of context factors, then gives the findings with extracts from individual reports, includes some insights from pupils and parents from the questionnaires administered and from focus groups which were held, and has a brief concluding paragraph summarising areas of strength and the main areas for development. The chart for each theme shows the percentage incidence of strong or weak practice for that theme in the four aspects of the planning process evaluated.

In the forty-four evaluations, planning for each theme was considered with reference to the four linked aspects of planning for improvement. For each theme where planning showed consistent strengths or more strengths than weaknesses, the theme was evaluated as one in which strengths predominate in that school. For each theme where planning showed

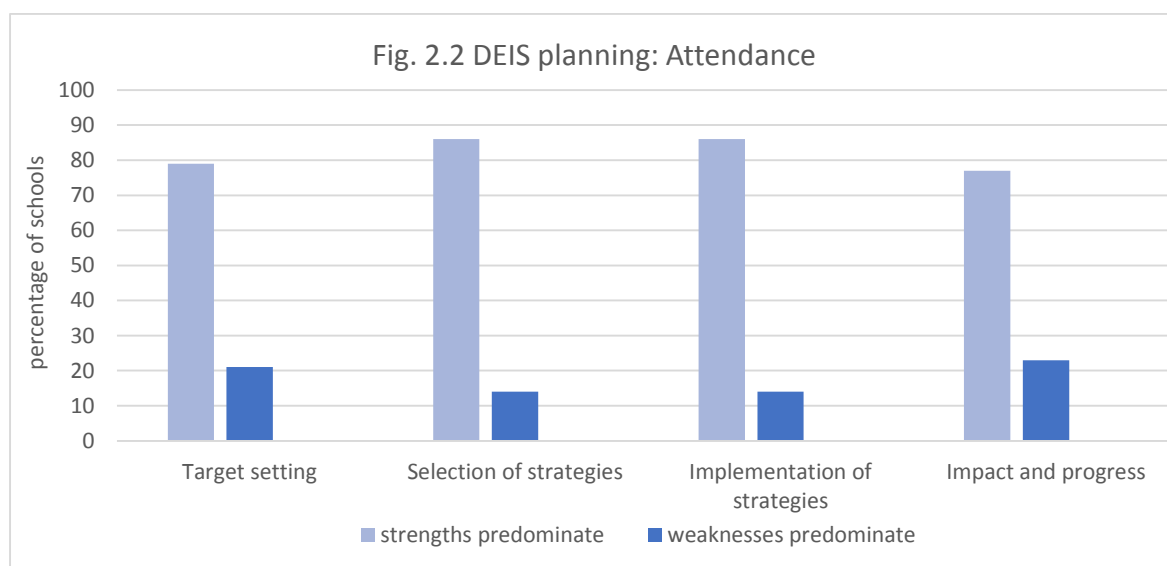
consistent weaknesses or more weaknesses than strengths, the theme was evaluated as one in which weaknesses predominate in that school.

Strengths predominated in planning for all DEIS themes. The extent to which strengths predominate in the planning themes is noteworthy. The most widespread good practice was found in the theme of progression where strengths predominate in almost all of the schools (97%). Most schools plan effectively in the areas of attendance (81%), retention (89%) and partnership (89%). Planning to improve literacy is also strong in most schools (77%). The weakest theme is planning to improve numeracy where strengths predominated in only 64% of schools.

## 2.2.1 Attendance

### Context

The DEIS planning process requires schools to set targets for improved attendance rates and to select and implement strategies that will allow them to achieve these targets. Schools are cognisant of the fact that overall pupil attainment and learning outcomes cannot improve if absenteeism remains problematic. All schools are required to make returns to the Educational Welfare Service of TUSLA, the Child and Family Agency<sup>6</sup> with regard to absences and suspensions. The most recent national analysis of attendance data found that the average number of pupils per school missing twenty days or more is roughly twice as high in DEIS primary schools as compared to other urban schools<sup>7</sup>. For this reason, attendance is rightly one of the themes included in the DEIS action planning process, and many of the resources and services available to DEIS schools relate in some way to attendance.



### Findings

The data in figure 2.2 above presents a very positive picture in relation to planning for improvement in attendance in DEIS schools. Strengths predominate in all aspects of action planning in most schools. The evaluations found that 79% had strengths in setting targets, while 86% had strengths in the selection and implementation of appropriate strategies and 77% had strengths in monitoring the impact and progress made. Almost all of the schools (90%), reported that overall attendance rates are either improving or have reached national norms.

<sup>6</sup> Formerly NEWB, the National Educational Welfare Board.

<sup>7</sup> Millar, D. *Analysis of School Attendance Data in Primary and Post-Primary Schools, 2010/11* (2013)

Setting appropriate targets for improvement is a key element of action planning. Most schools (79%) set SMART targets for improvements in pupils' attendance. In these schools, targets are set following analysis of available data. Typically, the data includes trends and patterns of attendance for the total school population and for identified groups and individuals. It is evident that in some of these schools, initial targets for improvements in pupil attendance were somewhat unrealistic or overambitious and that these were revised appropriately on foot of internal monitoring. Where strengths were identified, targets were specific, measurable, achievable and time bound. The evaluations identified a strong link between the setting of good targets and improvements in attendance rates, as evidenced by the following statements:

*The school has experienced considerable success in improving pupil attendance rates as a result of setting specific, realistic and time-bound targets and implementing practical and effective strategies to achieve these targets. Targets are subject to annual review and are revised in light of progress (2010).*

*There is commendable practice around the promotion of good attendance. SMART targets have been set and the school has achieved and exceeded its targets. (2014).*

In 21% of schools evaluated, there were weaknesses in target setting practices for attendance. This was evident particularly where poor attendance rates among a core group of pupils persists. Frequently, recommendations are made in the reports referring to the need for targets to be more specific and measurable:

*It is recommended that patterns of attendance be analysed to a greater extent and that targets be reviewed and constructed in such a way that they are specific and that outcomes can be measured (2010).*

*...these targets are general and would benefit from being more specific, measurable and time bound (2011).*

The evaluations indicate that strengths predominate in the strategies schools select and implement to improve attendance. It is evident that there is a good balance between preventative and remedial interventions. Examples of preventative interventions included:

- provision of Breakfast and Homework Clubs
- reward systems for good attendance
- parent text services
- scheduling assemblies on Mondays and Fridays
- every pupil and parent being welcomed to the school each day

The establishment of attendance committees in schools is another intervention referenced in reports as an effective means of ensuring that the issue of attendance is appropriately targeted. These committees, typically, comprise the principal, the HSCL coordinator and SCP personnel.

Schools report experiencing considerable success in improving the overall attendance rates of their pupils. This improvement in overall attendance rates is consistent with data supplied by the NEWB (now part of Tusla, Child and Family Agency) in its most recent publication on school attendance rates nationally:

*The percentage of overall student/days lost through absence in a school year is running at just over 6% in primary schools and around 8% in post-primary schools.*

*The figures at both levels for 2010/11 are lower than for 2009/10 and are at the lowest for the five year period 2006/07 – 2010/11.<sup>8</sup>*

While overall attendance rates have improved, there remains, however, a core group of pupils whose attendance rates have remained poor. This is despite the overall effectiveness of schools' efforts to plan systematically for improved attendance. Data provided by the NEWB<sup>9</sup> for 2010/11 indicates that just under 22% of pupils in DEIS Band 1 urban schools were absent for twenty days or more.

16% of the forty-four schools evaluated report a decrease in the number of pupils who have missed more than twenty school days. In these instances, schools have successfully employed a range of preventative strategies, including those listed above, in tackling this issue. There is good management of the planning, monitoring and review processes at whole-school level. There are very good links with agencies concerned with improving pupil attendance, including School Completion Programme (SCP) personnel and the Education Welfare Officers (EWO). A range of innovative approaches have been adopted such as a formal 'welcome back' system when poor attendees return to school. In one school:

*(Pupils) returning from absence are welcomed and supported purposefully to re-integrate them into their classes (2010).*

In another case, a school placed significant focus on welcoming the families of poor attendees on a regular basis into the school. Maintaining the sustained focus on improving the attendance rates of pupils' with ongoing attendance problems is the key to success in these schools.

Among other reporting requirements, all schools are obliged to report to Educational Welfare Service of Tusla, the Child and Family Agency, the number of pupils who have been absent for twenty days or more. The most extreme example of poor attendance rates among the forty-four DEIS schools evaluated concerns one school where 55% of the pupils missed twenty or more school days. The attendance of pupils who have missed more than twenty days has not improved or has disimproved in 27% of schools. The following quotes from inspection reports provide guidance to individual schools in relation to this issue:

*In spite of the improvement in overall attendance, a significant number of pupils are absent from school for more than 20 days per annum. The target set of reducing this number by 10% annually has not proved sustainable. It is recommended that more realistic targets be set for a smaller number of pupils whose attendance gives the greatest cause of concern (2010).*

In other cases, schools were advised to broaden their approach to ensure that poor attendance was seen as an issue to be resolved by the community as a whole:

*...the number of individual pupils who have missed at least 20 days remains high. The DEIS plan outlines targets and strategies aimed at improving these rates. It is recommended that these strategies should be reviewed. The potential to develop a community-based response to poor attendance, in co-operation with other schools and agencies in (named town) should now be explored (2014).*

In 2005, the Department's Inspectorate published *Literacy and Numeracy in Disadvantaged Schools: Challenges for Teachers and Learners*. In this report, the issue of poor attendance

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<sup>8</sup> NEWB (2013) Analysis of School Attendance Data in Primary and Post-Primary Schools 2010/11

<sup>9</sup> NEWB (2013) Analysis of School Attendance Data in Primary and Post-Primary Schools 2010/11

rates among a core group of pupils was raised. Almost ten years on, the issue remains in a significant minority (27%) of schools serving disadvantaged communities. In the context of DEIS planning for improvement in attendance, schools should consider how they partner with the full range of agencies operating in their local communities and seek to adopt community-based strategies aimed at tackling problematic attendance. The issue is addressed further in this report in the section dealing with Partnership.

### ***Pupil and parent views***

The creation of a warm and welcoming environment is key to providing positive experiences for pupils, which in turn is helpful in improving attendance rates. The results of questionnaires administered as part of the evaluations indicate that the majority of pupils (70%) like going to school. While this is positive, individual schools may benefit from conducting similar surveys or focus groups with their pupils as a means of identifying how the pupils' experiences of school can be improved. It is worth noting that parents hold a very positive view of the atmosphere in schools. Almost every parent surveyed (98%) agreed that schools welcome them.

There are somewhat contradictory views expressed by parents regarding attendance in the surveys. Virtually every parent (99%) stated that their children attend school most days. However, 7% also state that their children have missed a lot of days in the school year in which the evaluation took place. The pupil view is similarly interesting where 94% state that they come to school most days and in answering a different question, 13% state that they have missed a lot of school days. Another issue which emerges from the questionnaire responses is the fact that over 52% of pupils report staying out of school for reasons other than sickness.

<b>Question</b>	<b>'Yes' responses received</b>	<b>'No' responses received</b>	<b>'Don't know' responses received</b>
Pupils: I like coming to school	70% (963)	17% (234)	13% (179)
Parents: my child has missed a lot of school days this year	7% (98)	90% (1265)	3% (42)

### ***Conclusions***

Key to addressing the issue of poor pupil attendance is the creation of a positive school climate. Almost all of the schools evaluated work successfully to ensure that this is the case and as a result, most schools report that the overall pupil attendance rates have improved. It is evident that schools are working hard to ensure that attendance rates are improving or that good attendance levels are maintained. Attendance committees ensure that sufficient focus is placed on the issue. Gathering and analysing attendance data regularly and using this appropriately in target setting, ensures that the targets chosen are SMART. The major challenge facing schools relates to tackling the issue of attendance by a small group of pupils with persistent attendance issues.

#### **What most schools are doing well:**

- planning for improved pupil attendance
- creating a positive and welcoming environment
- implementing effective strategies to improve attendance
- working effectively with colleagues in other agencies for the benefit of pupils

#### **What schools could do better:**

- set more realistic targets in relation to pupils with persistent attendance issues

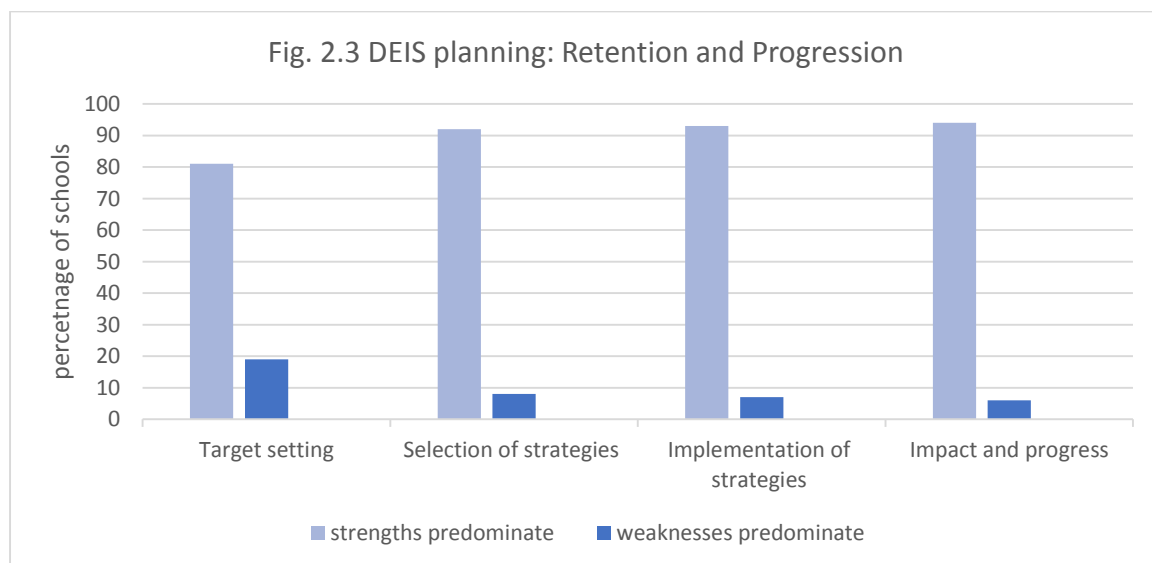
- broaden their approaches to tackling persistent attendance issues to involve the full range of agencies operating in local areas

## 2.2.2 Retention and progression

### Context

A recent ESRI report<sup>10</sup> highlighted the importance of school experiences in influencing progression to higher and further education. Successful retention and progression of pupils in the education system, therefore, are inextricably linked with the concept of Lifelong Learning. As outlined in the DEIS action plan, retention relates to ensuring that pupils remain in the school system until the completion of the Leaving Certificate examination. Progression relates to ensuring pupils make successful transitions from one school level to the next; either from junior primary to senior primary schools or from primary to post-primary schools in the case of the forty-four DEIS schools evaluated.

For most primary schools, retaining pupils in school from junior infants to sixth class and progression to second level are not problematic and therefore action planning for improvement in these areas may not be a central part of the school's DEIS planning process. However, a positive experience of primary school is key to ensuring progression to second level and retention in school to the end of senior cycle. In that regard, schools should identify those pupils who are at risk of early leaving, and take action to reduce or eliminate the factors that cause them to drop out. Along with parents and teaching staff, agencies such as SCP and HSCL play an important role in determining the types of action or interventions which could be provided. In some instances, these interventions are targeted at specific groups or individuals in the school, while in other cases, universal prevention strategies are implemented.



### Findings

The findings in relation to action planning for the retention and progression of pupils in the forty-four DEIS primary schools are very positive. In almost all schools, the strategies selected (92%) and implemented (93%) to ensure the retention and progression of pupils are predominantly strong. Similarly, almost all schools (94%) have effective mechanisms in place to monitor the impact and progress of the interventions selected. The weakest element of the action planning process identified was target setting; however in most schools (81%) strengths predominated in this aspect of planning.

<sup>10</sup> ESRI (2014) Leaving School in Ireland: A Longitudinal Study of Post-School Transitions



The findings, limited by the extent of the evidence available in primary schools, indicates that these DEIS schools are successful in ensuring that pupils complete primary school and that almost every pupil progresses to second level. All forty-four schools report retention of all pupils. Progression of all pupils to second level schools is also recorded for almost all schools (91%). The following statement outlines the situation in one school, but it exemplifies the situation in most:

*There are no challenges for the school with regard to the retention of pupils to complete the primary cycle or their progression to second level. Data from the last three years indicate that all pupils have progressed to second-level schools (2010).*

While it may be surprising that full progression is not evident in 9% of the schools, it is worth noting that a very small number of pupils have failed to transfer; for example one pupil in one school in 2010. It is evident that schools' work with those pupils who are at risk of dropping out of school is effective. HSCL coordinators, EWOs and SCP personnel are referenced as playing important roles in that regard. The links to a broader range of agencies including youth services and further and higher education providers are also paying dividends.

One of the more significant challenges to successful practice being maintained in any system is the development of complacency. In that regard, the evaluation reports indicate that schools maintain an appropriate focus on retention and progression. The following examples indicate that schools place emphasis on ensuring that pupils make a smooth transition from primary to post-primary schools:

*...there is good established practice in place to ensure the 100% success in transferring of pupils to post-primary schools in the area. The work of the SCP and HSCL co-ordinators is noteworthy in this regard (2014).*

*In order to ease the transfer issue, the school holds information evenings for the pupils of fifth and sixth classes on an annual basis. Entrance forms are provided for all pupils and support is provided by the school where difficulties arise for parents when completing the forms. The school ensures that all pupils have submitted application forms on time (2010).*

Other actions pursued by schools include:

- attendance at post-primary school open days and induction programmes by senior pupils
- the provision of Easter and summer camps based in the post-primary school
- discussions regarding subject choice at second level

It is evident that the strategies selected and implemented are working for the overwhelming majority of pupils at primary level. Nonetheless, we know that retention of students remains an issue at post-primary level.<sup>11</sup> An important challenge for DEIS primary schools, therefore, is to ensure that retention and progression remain areas of focus in their DEIS action planning. This is best done by ensuring not just the retention of pupils, but their meaningful retention in terms of learning in its broadest sense. This may involve an examination of individual pupil's experiences of school; how often they are out of class, what forms of intervention are offered to them and how they are prepared for their progression to second level. This is particularly the case for those pupils identified as being most at risk of dropping out. Real success in the retention and progression of pupils can only be measured later in the pupil's engagement in the education system. In that regard, schools should seek to maintain links with post-primary

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<sup>11</sup> Department of Education and Skills (2014) *Looking at planning processes in forty-four DEIS post-primary schools*

schools to track the progress, or otherwise, of their pupils. This would involve the development of communications strategies aimed at addressing the issues of retention and progression.

### **Pupil and parent views**

Parents' expectations for their children are very high in terms of completion of secondary school and progression to third level in many instances. The vast majority of parents report that their children will progress to post-primary education (99.5%) and remain to complete their Leaving Certificate (94%). In focus groups conducted during the evaluations, many parents expressed a desire for their children to progress further to third level. This view is mirrored by pupils' views on their own future which are equally positive. 93% of pupils responded that they expected to remain in school until the end of secondary school. Also of note is the fact that 77% of pupils indicate their desire to progress to college. A key element in the development of these views, as reported by parents in focus groups, is the creation of a positive school climate; one which is supportive of their children and of their learning.

<b>Question</b>	<b>'Yes' responses received</b>	<b>'No' responses received</b>	<b>'Don't know' responses received</b>
Pupils: I would like to go to college	77% (1060)	7% (96)	16% (220)
Parents: My child will stay in school to do the Leaving Cert	94% (1304)	1% (14)	5% (70)

### **Conclusions**

The evaluations indicate that schools engage in action planning effectively for the retention and progression of pupils to the extent that this can be measured at primary level. They also highlight the fact that parents are ambitious for their children and that pupils themselves express a strong desire to finish formal schooling and to progress from there to third level. It is apparent that the creation of a positive school climate, which promotes an atmosphere of respect, inclusiveness and involvement and enables pupils to experience success, assists in ensuring that pupils remain in school and develop an interest in progressing through the education system to third level.

#### **What most schools are doing well:**

- Ensuring that pupils are retained in school until the end of the primary cycle
- Ensuring that pupils progress to post-primary schools
- Ensuring that support programmes offered are correctly aligned to meet the needs of children

#### **What schools could do better:**

- Examine the most marginalised pupils' experiences of school to ensure their meaningful retention within the education system
- Consider maintaining contact with post-primary schools to identify trends and provide early supports aimed at improving the retention and progression of pupils

## **2.2.3 Literacy**

### **Context**

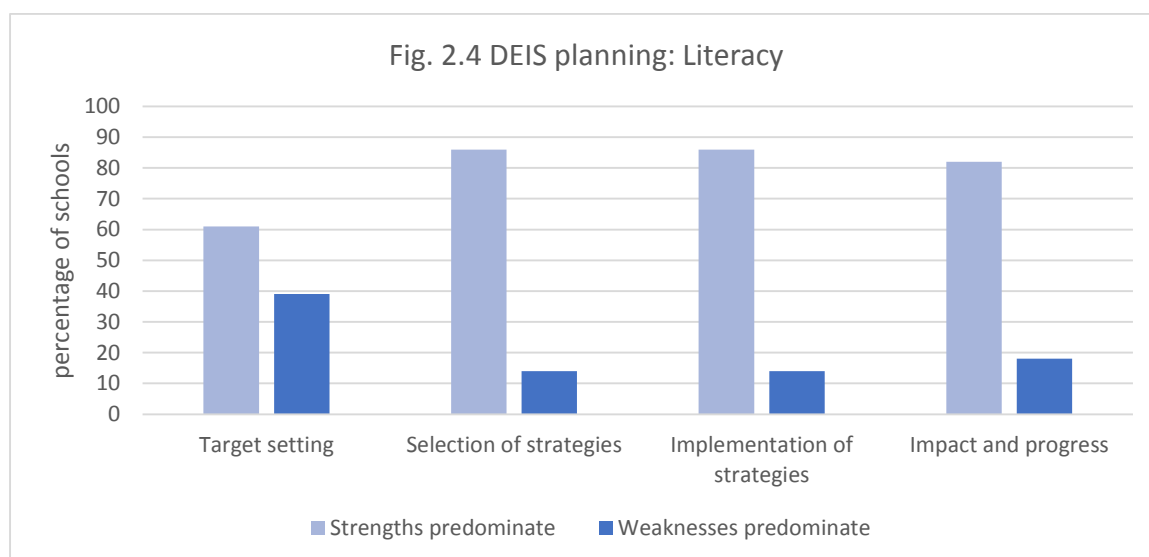
Literacy is a fundamental set of skills required to derive benefit from education. Literacy includes the capacity to read, understand and critically appreciate various forms of communication including spoken language, printed text, broadcast media, and digital media.<sup>12</sup> Achieving proficiency in literacy is a crucial objective of the Irish education system. Unless children reach adequate literacy standards, they cannot fully benefit from our literacy-based education system. In order to support work in the area, the Department published its *National*

<sup>12</sup> Department of Education and Skills (2011) *Literacy and Numeracy for Life: The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People 2011 - 2020*

*Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People 2011-2020*. In seeking to implement the strategy, schools were advised of the need to increase the time available for reading instruction.<sup>13</sup> More recently (2012), the Inspectorate published *School Self-Evaluation: Guidelines for Primary Schools*. There is strong emphasis in the *Guidelines* on how schools can use the self-evaluation process to ensure better learning outcomes for their pupils.

A number of specific measures related to literacy, including intensive professional development programmes for teachers, have been available to schools participating in the DEIS programme. Support to implement specific literacy programmes such as *Reading Recovery* and *First Steps* was offered to all DEIS schools. The HSCL Scheme supported and developed initiatives such as *Reading for Fun*. Examples of effective practice in literacy were reported by the Inspectorate in *Effective literacy and numeracy practices in DEIS schools* (2009).

The forty-four DEIS evaluations carried out over the three school years focused on how effectively schools used data from their own assessment of reading and from other sources to set targets, to select and implement appropriate strategies and to monitor outcomes at individual pupil and/or group level.



### Findings

As illustrated in figure 2.4 above, the overall situation in relation to literacy is positive. Strengths predominate in all aspects of action planning for improvement in literacy. Most schools demonstrate good practice in selecting appropriate strategies (86%) and subsequently implementing them (86%). Similarly, most schools (82%) effectively monitor the impact of strategies and progress towards achieving targets. There are however, challenges facing schools. While practice is effective in a majority of schools (61%), target setting practices require improvement in 39% of schools.

Individual school inspection reports provide examples of target-setting practices. In the first instance there are schools (61%) where targets for literacy are SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time-bound). Further, these schools devise targets which are differentiated, frequently by class groups or for those pupils for whom extra resources have been provided. Where SMART targets are set, many are framed in terms of improvements on standardised tests. The following are illustrative of this:

<sup>13</sup> Department of Education and Skills (2011) *Circular 56/2011*

*The current DEIS plan sets out revised targets for improving pupils' literacy standards. The targets are measurable and realistic. Specifically, it is planned to reduce the number of pupils who perform at or below the 20<sup>th</sup> percentile in the Micra-T tests from 45% to 39% over a three-year period (2011).*

*The school has outlined some specific targets relating to pupil attainment in literacy; principally, to reduce the number of pupils between the 21<sup>st</sup> and 40<sup>th</sup> percentile by 20% and to increase the number of pupils between the 41<sup>st</sup> and 60<sup>th</sup> percentile by 25% in the Micra-T tests (2014).*

Weaknesses in target setting were identified in 39% of schools. Inspectors identify two main issues in that regard. First, some of the targets are overly general:

*Overall, attainment targets for literacy are specific while there are general targets for reading and writing. It is recommended that the targets for reading and writing be revised to ensure that they are more specific and measurable (2011).*

*... (the) targets are defined primarily in terms of strategies and approaches to be implemented on a whole-school basis or at specific class levels. It is recommended that these targets be reviewed at the earliest opportunity to ensure that the revised targets are expressed in terms of improvements to be achieved in pupil learning outcomes (2014).*

Secondly, some schools fail to link their targets with the data available to them:

*It is recommended that further use be made of the assessment information available to inform future programme planning and the targeting of resources (2010).*

*It is recommended that the available data be further interrogated to enable the school to set clear focused targets for literacy that are directly related to the pupils' learning needs, including some targets for individual class levels (2011).*

*...it is recommended that the full range of assessment data available to teachers at individual class level be used more effectively in planning ongoing interventions (2014).*

While a substantial minority of schools have weaknesses in the area of target setting, it is evident that schools are effective in selecting and implementing strategies designed to improve their pupils' literacy skills. In most instances, evaluation reports refer to the successful implementation of the range of initiatives supported by the Department. These include:

- Reading Recovery
- Literacy Lift Off
- Reading for Fun
- First Steps Reading
- First Steps Writing
- First Steps Speaking and Listening

Some of these programmes are designed to be delivered in a support context; others in a mainstream class setting. Where implemented effectively, teachers modify their teaching approaches in order to ensure that the literacy needs of the pupils are being met effectively. Schools also use a range of strategies effectively in order to implement these and other programmes. These include the implementation of commercially available programmes and the provision of dedicated and intensive support at particular class levels in the form of station

teaching or 'Power Hour.' The following extracts from evaluation reports reflect schools' efforts in this area:

*Suitable strategies and interventions are in place for all targeted groups and all staff members are familiar with their aims and purposes. Effective teaching was observed in the Forward Together programme, First Steps, literacy Power Hour and station teaching, PAT and Jolly Phonics (2010).*

*The school is implementing a wide range of effective interventions to support the teaching and learning of literacy .... Aspects of Literacy Lift-Off and First Steps Reading and Writing feature in all classes (2011).*

*A number of interventions and strategies to promote literacy attainment are implemented in a very effective manner in the school. These include aspects of the First Steps Writing programme, Literacy Lift Off, Reading Buddies, Jolly Phonics, Reading Recovery and a structured approach to the development of pupils' comprehension skills and phonological awareness skills (2014).*

While accepting the small number of schools involved, the evaluation findings suggest that planning practices for the improvement of pupils' literacy skills are improving. In the Inspectorate's 2011 report on DEIS planning practices<sup>14</sup>, inspectors highlighted the lack of improvement in the pupils' literacy skills in seven of the eighteen schools involved in the 2010 evaluation. In these cases, inspectors were critical of, *inter alia*, the approaches adopted to the teaching of reading skills and the inadequate analysis of the outcomes of assessment. In the schools most recently evaluated, it is evident that many of these concerns have been addressed.

The positive impact of planning is evident in improvements in key aspects of the pupils' literacy skills. In particular, inspectors comment favourably on the improvements which are reported by schools in pupils' reading and writing outcomes. Examples of these include:

*Excellent progress has been made in the development of the pupils' reading skills whose attainment is now approaching national norms (2010).*

*The impact of interventions is having a positive effect on pupil attainment in reading; the school has achieved its targets set out in the DEIS plan. The numbers of pupils performing below the 50<sup>th</sup> percentile has reduced by 5% in the past four years (2011).*

*Data from standardised tests indicates that the school's concentrated efforts are proving to be of most benefit to those pupils whose attainment is in the lower range and the vast majority of pupils make progress (2014).*

The improvements in attainment on standardised tests, as reported by schools, are consistent with the findings of national evaluations undertaken in DEIS schools. For example, the Education Research Centre (ERC) published a bulletin report in 2013 entitled *The evaluation of the School Support Programme under DEIS: Changes in pupil achievement in urban primary schools between 2007 and 2013.*<sup>15</sup> This report highlights improvements achieved by pupils on standardised tests in literacy:

*The results are very encouraging, indicating that test scores at all grade levels increased significantly between the collection of baseline data in 2007 and follow-up testing in 2010. Furthermore, outcomes from the most recent round of testing in spring*

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<sup>14</sup> Department of Education and Skills (2011) *An Evaluation of Planning Processes in DEIS Primary Schools*

of 2013 indicated that, not only were the initial gains maintained, they were built on between 2010 and 2013<sup>15</sup>.

Improvements in attainment are noted for pupils of both higher and lower academic abilities. The report states that there has:

*...been a striking reduction in low-scorers (as evidenced by very large decreases in the percentages of pupils scoring at or below the 10<sup>th</sup> percentile in both reading and mathematics), the percentage of high achievers in both subject areas has been maintained, and in some cases, increased<sup>16</sup>.*

The main outstanding challenge in terms of impact and progress identified in the evaluations of action planning for improvement in literacy in the forty-four schools lies in ensuring the development of the pupils' oral language skills, while at the same time maintaining the focus on planning for the development of the pupils' reading and writing skills. Despite the fact that there have been improvements reported in the pupils' reading and writing skills, it is of note that in the evaluations conducted in 2011 and 2014 recommendations relating to the pupils' oral language development were made in 50% of the individual school reports.

Examples of these recommendations include:

*As a means of improving pupils' attainment in literacy further, it is recommended that targets for oral language be devised and a structured oral language programme be put in place and implemented throughout the school (2011).*

*Teachers are experiencing considerable success in developing the pupils' reading skills. The pupils are reading at instructional level and are positively disposed towards reading. Very good resources have been provided and these are used effectively. To build on this practice it is advised that specific guidance is given to teachers in formulating interventions aimed at improving oral language skills (2014).*

### **Pupil and parent views**

Parent and pupil views on literacy were gleaned from questionnaires administered as part of the evaluation process. Discussions were also held with a focus group of parents. Comments such as the following were made in evaluation reports:

*Parents in the focus group were very positive about the school's approach to reading and indicated that their children were reading books appropriate to their ability (2011).*

Interestingly, parents' views on their children's abilities in literacy are significantly more positive than those of pupils. In response to a question on their children's progress in reading, 92% of parents stated that their children were doing well. The equivalent figure for pupils' views of their reading abilities was just 74%. The pupils' views of their abilities are consistent, as a further 73% stated that they were doing well at writing and spelling. Schools should take note, however, of the number of pupils who report not being sure of how well they are doing in various aspects of literacy. Just under 20% report not being sure how good they are at writing and spelling with 18% not being sure of how well they are doing at reading. There are implications here for assessment practices, which should be explored by schools.

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<sup>15</sup> Educational Research Centre (2013), *The evaluation of the School Support Programme under DEIS: Changes in pupil achievement in urban primary schools between 2007 and 2013*.

<sup>16</sup> Educational Research Centre (2013), *The evaluation of the School Support Programme under DEIS: Changes in pupil achievement in urban primary schools between 2007 and 2013*.

Perhaps reflective of the developed sense of partnership between the school and home, almost 91% of parents stated that the school encourages their children to read at home. The figure for pupils who report that they read at home is also high at 81%.

Question	'Yes' responses received	'No' responses received	'Don't know' responses received
Pupils: I am a good reader:	74% (1015)	8% (110)	18% (247)
Parents: my child is doing well at reading:	92% (1302)	4% (57)	4% (57)

### Conclusions

Overall, the evaluation findings indicate strengths in relation to planning for improvement in literacy. Most schools have selected, implemented and monitored an appropriate range of strategies and improved pupil outcomes are reported by schools, particularly in reading and writing. As is the case with many of the DEIS themes, while the majority of schools (61%) have strengths in setting targets, a significant minority need to improve practice in this area. In particular, targets to improve oral language, based on a rigorous assessment of available evidence is required.

#### What most schools are doing well:

- Selecting, implementing and monitoring appropriate interventions to improve pupils' literacy levels
- Raising attainment levels in reading and writing
- Improving pupils' attitudes and dispositions to reading

#### What schools could do better:

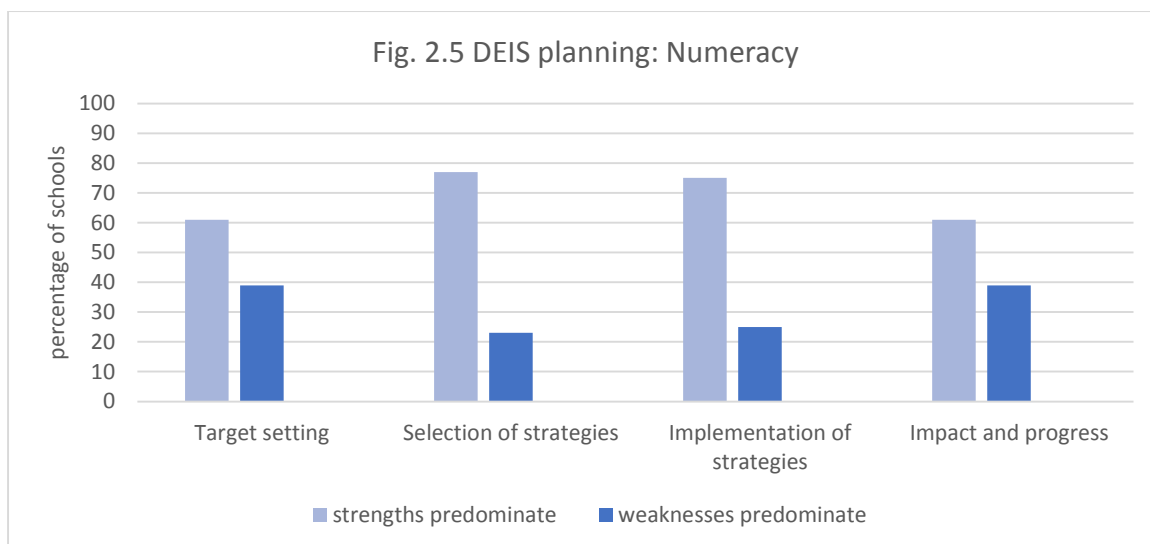
- Ensure greater attention is given to setting targets for literacy which are SMART
- Ensure that action planning focuses on the development of pupils' oral language skills
- Examine assessment practices, including the provision of feedback to pupils, to ensure that pupils are aware of how well they are doing and how they could make further progress in the various elements of literacy

## 2.2.4 Numeracy

### Context

As with literacy, numeracy is an important element of the DEIS action plan and the Inspectorate has published examples of effective practice with regard to numeracy in *Effective literacy and numeracy practices in DEIS schools* (2009). The National Literacy and Numeracy strategy's definition of numeracy encompasses the ability to use mathematical understanding and skills to solve problems and meet the demands of day-to-day living. Thus, numeracy is seen not only as relevant to the Mathematics curriculum, but also as having a focus across the curriculum. Supports to improve numeracy skills available to schools participating in DEIS include *Maths Recovery* and *Ready, Set, Go Maths*. These programmes provide intensive and early intervention support to strengthen pupils' grasp of numeracy. *Maths for Fun*, implemented through the HSCL scheme, is also available to schools participating in DEIS. The effectiveness of schools' action planning to improve the numeracy skills of pupils, including the use of data to set targets and the monitoring of outcomes, was evaluated.





### Findings

While the overall picture relating to numeracy is relatively positive, weaknesses were identified in a significant minority of schools. As illustrated in figure 2.5 above, strengths predominate in most schools in relation to selecting (77%) and implementing (75%) strategies aimed at developing the pupils' numeracy skills. However, in a number of schools, weaknesses were noted in target setting and monitoring the impact of strategies and progress towards achieving targets to improve numeracy. While strengths predominate in 61% of schools in these areas, it is a matter of concern that there is scope to improve practice in 39% of schools.

Inspectors reported effective target-setting practices in only 61% of schools. Examples of effective practices include robust examination of available evidence, including analysis of data, and appropriate linking of targets to evidence:

*Assessment data from both standardised tests and the school's own checklists are analysed in detail and are used to determine specific, practical, measurable and time-bound targets for classes, groups and individuals (2010).*

*Collaborative target setting for numeracy is central to the original and revised DEIS plans. Targets are expressed in terms of specific, realistic and measurable improvements in pupil attainment from baseline assessment data levels (2011).*

*The DEIS planning process for numeracy sets out specific and measurable targets. The school aims to reduce the number of pupils [attaining] between the 21<sup>st</sup> and 40<sup>th</sup> percentile by 20% and increase the number of pupils [attaining] between the 41<sup>st</sup> and 60<sup>th</sup> percentile by 25% (2014).*

Weaknesses were identified in target setting in 39% of schools. The main issue to emerge from the evaluation findings is insufficient attention given to analysing available data, including assessment outcomes. The following examples from individual school reports illustrate the need to improve practice:

*The targets for the improvement of numeracy are too general. There is no evidence to suggest that any analysis of standardised test results has been undertaken in order to identify areas of difficulty and to identify target groups of pupils (2010).*

*It is also recommended that the school analyse and use pupils' results in the various strands of the Mathematics curriculum to set more specific, time-bound targets for focused intervention (2011).*

*This analysis [of assessment data] should be central to the target setting process with a clear focus placed on enhancing pupil achievement in defined areas of Mathematics with identified target groups in the school (2014).*

It is evident that almost two fifths of schools need to examine their practices in relation to using data when setting targets for numeracy. Schools should devise a systematic process of gathering and analysing data in order to improve target setting for numeracy.

Good practice was identified in most schools with regard to the selection (77%) and implementation (75%) of strategies to improve numeracy. Much of the commentary in individual school's evaluation reports focuses on the range of strategies being utilised to implement agreed approaches to Mathematics teaching. Team and station teaching feature prominently among the strategies being used. The involvement of support teachers and some parents in aspects of these initiatives is acknowledged and affirmed.

The implementation of strategies to improve numeracy requires class and support teachers to adopt new teaching approaches, to plan their programmes differently and to ensure that learning takes place effectively. This approach facilitates the embedding of key strategies into everyday classroom practice in the schools. Among the strategies implemented in the DEIS schools were:

- Ready, Set, Go Maths
- Maths for fun
- Problem of the week
- Maths recovery

Implementing agreed strategies requires good coordination and, in schools where strategies are being implemented effectively, the coordination of programmes was identified as being highly effective. Teachers, some of whom have received specialist training in the interventions, play 'a key role in their promotion and implementation throughout the school (2010).'

In contrast to the other DEIS themes, weaknesses were reported in the selection and implementation of strategies to improve numeracy in over 20% of schools. In these schools, the need to adopt a more focussed approach to the development of a differentiated Mathematics programme is highlighted. While the challenge of developing a differentiated programme is generally considered in the context of improving attainment levels of pupils of lower academic abilities, in these evaluations, the issue pertains predominantly to pupils of higher academic abilities. Reports indicate that these pupils are insufficiently challenged:

*It is also noted that, in some instances, pupils are obviously capable of working at a higher level. Therefore, more challenging learning objectives need to be set for more able pupils (2010).*

*Amongst the next challenges for the school is to focus even greater attention on higher achieving pupils... (2011)*

*Increased focus should be placed on the development of a systematic plan for the development of pupils' mathematical language at a whole-school level and on the use of ICT programmes to challenge those pupils with high attainment levels (2014).*

It is important to note, however, that there are examples of schools giving consideration to meeting the needs of pupils of higher academic abilities. In one school, an after-school programme is provided for this cohort. In another:

*....exceptionally able pupils are provided with additional opportunities to extend their mathematical skills through the use of Scratch programming language and robotics (2014).*

In marked contrast to the attention given to impact and progress in the area of literacy, there is significantly less attention given by schools to this aspect of action planning in numeracy. Whereas strengths were apparent in 80% of schools in terms of monitoring the impact and progress in literacy, the corresponding figure for numeracy stands at just over 60%. It may be the case that schools evaluated in 2010, in particular, had prioritised planning for improvements in literacy in the first instance and had yet to identify agreed actions in numeracy. Therefore, it is reasonable to expect that progress in action planning for numeracy might be somewhat more limited. As the statement below implies, progress in some schools in 2011 was still limited:

*School management acknowledges that limited progress has been made in relation to the implementation of numeracy in the context of its DEIS plan and has identified numeracy as a priority for development in the context of its forthcoming plan (2011).*

The evidence from schools evaluated more recently, however, presents a more positive picture. While the number of schools evaluated in 2014 was small (ten), strengths were noted in terms of impact and progress in numeracy in 70% of schools. The following excerpts from 2014 reports indicate progress made in the area:

*The level of success achieved by the school in raising pupils' overall attainment in numeracy is considerable. The attainment of the current cohort of pupils compares very favourably with national data (2014).*

*Over the past three years the school has been successful in reducing the numbers of pupils achieving a STEN of three or below (2014).*

These positive findings are consistent with the ERC's<sup>17</sup> recent findings regarding improvements in attainment in numeracy among pupils. Referring specifically to the issue of low achievers in Mathematics, the report states that 'by 2013, pupils in 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> class were not too far from the national average of 10%....' and that in the case of pupils in senior classes:

*....there has been a large reduction (8.5%) in the percentage of pupils with very low scores since baseline data were collected in 2007.*

In reporting overall improvements in attainment levels among pupils, specific note is made of the fact that:

*The percentage of high-scoring pupils more than doubled at 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> class levels over the 6-year period, while in 2013 the percentage of high-scorers in mathematics at 3<sup>rd</sup> class level slightly exceeded that in the norm group.*

### ***Pupil and parent views***

Parents hold a more positive view of how their children are doing in Mathematics than do their children. Slightly over 86% of parents responded that their children were doing well in Mathematics whereas the corresponding figure for pupils was 76%. 68% of pupils surveyed stated that they liked Mathematics. It is noteworthy, however, that 20% of the pupils surveyed

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<sup>17</sup> Educational Research Centre (2013), *The evaluation of the School Support Programme under DEIS: Changes in pupil achievement in urban primary schools between 2007 and 2013.*

indicated that they did not like Mathematics and a further 12% of pupils stated that they did not know whether or not they liked Mathematics.

Question	'Yes' responses received	'No' responses received	'Don't know' responses received
Pupils: I like Maths:	68% (935)	20% (275)	12% (165)
Parents: my child is doing well at Maths	86% (1208)	6% (84)	8% (112)

### **Conclusions**

While the overall picture in relation to action planning to improve numeracy in DEIS schools is positive, it is of concern that almost 40% of schools need to improve their practice in setting targets for improvement. Three quarters of the schools evaluated demonstrated strengths in selecting and implementing strategies to improve numeracy. Inspectors reported that schools implement the programmes supported by the Department. Progress in improving attainment in numeracy, however, as reported by the schools, is not as evident. Poor target-setting practices, insufficient attention given to differentiation of lessons and a lack of clarity regarding teaching objectives are among the challenges referred to in evaluation reports.

A majority of pupils regard themselves as being good at Mathematics (76%) and hold favourable views (68%) of the subject. It is a matter of concern, however, that a worryingly high number of pupils regard themselves as not doing well or not knowing how well they are doing in Mathematics (24%). Similarly, schools need to examine why a sizeable minority of their pupils (32%) either do not like or are unsure as to whether they like Mathematics.

Schools should consider using the school self-evaluation process to examine pupils' disposition towards their learning. A range of evaluation tools, including focus group prompts and surveys are available in the resources section of the [www.schoolself-evaluation.ie](http://www.schoolself-evaluation.ie) website.

#### **What most schools are doing well:**

- Selecting and implementing strategies to improve numeracy
- Coordinating the implementation of a range of interventions
- Embedding key strategies to improve numeracy into every day classroom practice

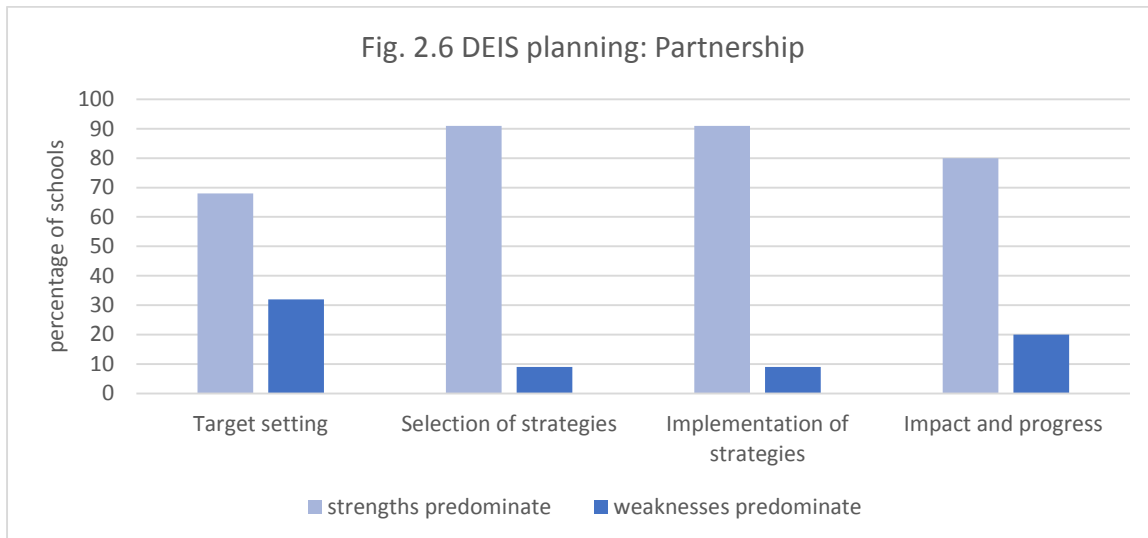
#### **What schools could do better:**

- Set targets which are more specific and more informed by analysed data
- Provide differentiated programmes with a particular focus on improving attainment levels of pupils of higher academic abilities
- Seek to improve pupil disposition towards Mathematics

## **2.2.5 Partnership with parents and others**

### **Context**

Schools supported through the DEIS action plan are expected to develop partnerships with parents and with the community. They are also required to develop links with a range of external agencies in order to support pupils to remain in school and to experience success. The findings from the evaluations in these areas were collated under the heading of partnership with parents and others. The development and fostering of effective links with parents and the local community are critical aspects of the DEIS planning process. The role of the HSCL coordinator and of SCP personnel is important in establishing, developing and fostering effective links between the school, the home and the local community, including those providing further and higher education.



### Findings

Figure 2.6 above reflects the positive findings of the evaluations in relation to action planning to improve partnerships with parents and others. Reports indicate strengths in almost all schools in the selection (91%) and implementation (91%) of strategies to improve partnerships. Strengths were also identified in most schools (80%) in monitoring the impact and progress of these strategies. However, it is evident that a small number of schools (20%), need to pay greater attention to monitoring the impact and progress of strategies selected. Following the pattern evident in the other DEIS themes, the evaluations indicate that target setting is the weakest element, with weaknesses in 32% of schools in this aspect of planning.

Setting appropriate targets is a key element of successful action planning. While the majority of schools (68%) have strengths in setting targets to develop partnership with parents and the local community, it is evident that many of these are general in nature. Examples of these include:

*....to foster the involvement of parents in the school (2010).*

*....to improve the level of partnership with parents and others (2011).*

*The DEIS plan contains series of generic targets designed to enhance partnership with parents and others (2014).*

There are, however, examples of schools which include specific targets in the area of developing partnerships with parents and the local community. One report refers to the fact that:

*....specific and measurable targets have been outlined collaboratively to facilitate the involvement of parents and community agencies in the work of the school (2011).*

In another instance, a school has:

*....identified clear targets to promote parental involvement in the school and in their children's education (2014).*

Schools experience considerable success in the selection and implementation of a range of strategies to improve partnerships with parents. Common among these in almost all schools (91%) is the provision of courses or classes for parents. There are two main types of courses

provided: those which provide a positive experience of education to parents and those which carry some form of accreditation. The primary aim of the first type of course is:

*...to empower parents to support their children's education. These programmes are closely linked to extending and developing parents' skills in supporting their children's learning (2011).*

Where FETAC accredited courses are provided there is:

*...the dual purpose of enhancing the parents' own educational experience and skills and cultivating positive relations between the school and the home (2010).*

Schools report that both types of courses are effective in terms of their stated objectives. The results of parent questionnaires indicate that there is very good awareness among parents (86%) of the extent and nature of courses provided for them in schools. The work of HSCL coordinators in facilitating courses for parents is affirmed strongly in the reports. Other elements of their work are also strongly endorsed. Virtually every reference to the impact of the work of the HSCL coordinators in the reports is positively framed. References are made to the efforts undertaken to involve parents in school-related activities such as shared reading and the homework club.

Strategies which encourage parents to come into the school to support pupils' learning can have a positive effect on consolidating links between home and school. Thus, schools involve parents in aspects of school life. One report affirms:

*...a worthwhile and well-organised pilot school-based programme to encourage the use of mathematics in the home and to further the school's DEIS objective of strengthening links with parents (2011).*

Parents also take part in programmes aimed at improving literacy and numeracy levels among pupils. Typically, these include:

- Maths for fun
- Paired reading
- Assisting with the school library

Other initiatives which include parents aim to improve the attitudes of pupils to their experiences of school. Thus, parental involvement in *Breakfast Clubs*, *Homework Clubs* and sports day is reported as:

*'... facilitating shared understanding about school-based learning (2010).'*

Where schools have a high proportion of pupils whose first language is not English enrolled, they work effectively to engage both the pupils and their parents. In some cases, parents attend English classes.

Strategies to improve partnerships with the school community were selected and implemented in a small number (20%) of schools. A range of agencies, both statutory and non-statutory, operate in many areas served by DEIS schools. These include Drugs Task Forces, Local Partnership Companies, the Family Support Services and Youth Services. Some recent evaluation reports refer to the extent of schools' links with relevant agencies. The following is one example:

*There are excellent links with a range of agencies operating in the area. These links benefit the children, their parents and the operation of the school in general (2014).*

However, taking the forty-four reports as a whole, there are few specific references to the adoption of a multi-agency approach to addressing some of the significant challenges facing schools. Given that the focus of the work of many of these agencies includes families, it would be of benefit to schools to broaden their perspectives in terms of the development of links with the local community. If, for example, a school's DEIS action planning focuses on improving attendance for pupils with persistent attendance issues, the co-ordination of supports from a range of agencies and the linking of this with schools' own efforts could assist in alleviating some of the issues impacting on attendance. Similarly, a systematic approach to including the relevant post-primary school and other relevant agencies, including the School Completion Programme, in planning for the retention of pupils and their progression to post-primary schools and beyond, should be an inherent part of the planning process. In short, tackling issues from a multi-agency perspective is likely to provide better outcomes particularly for those young people at risk of not being retained in the education system until the completion of the *Leaving Certificate* examination.

### **Parent views**

The results of surveys conducted for the evaluations indicate that in almost all cases, parents report positively on their inclusion in the life of the school. In focus groups held with parents during the course of the evaluations, they report overwhelmingly that schools have open door policies and teachers are approachable. Questionnaire responses suggest that this view is widely held among almost all parents (98%). Given the importance of regular meetings between teachers and parents, it is worth noting that virtually all parents felt they were able to discuss their children's progress in schools. Many of the DEIS reports highlight the role and work of the HSCL in that regard. Almost all parents (96%) surveyed for the evaluations indicated that their children were very happy in school.

A growing sense of confidence among parents is also evident in schools:

*The results of parental questionnaires, school-based research and discussions with parents provide ample evidence of improved parental attitudes and expectations (2010).*

Involving parents in the life of the school has brought many benefits. Many reports reference a growing sense of trust among the parent body in schools:

*'...(a) focus group interview of parents indicates that the HSCL coordinator and SCP project worker have established high levels of trust and respect in the local community (2014).*

This has resulted in greater levels of engagement by parents with schools. In another school:

*The proportion of parents from the Traveller community attending parent-teacher meetings has risen from 11% to 80%. This is a testament to the school's success in fostering strong partnerships with parents (2011).*

Parents report a growing sense of willingness to engage with schools. They report that key school personnel, such as principals and HSCL coordinators are 'always available' and accessible as the need arises. Just under 90% of parents stated that schools advise them about how to help their children. Schools are very effective in reaching out to recent arrivals to the country. In these cases, parents:

*....speak highly of the efforts made by the school to make them feel part of the school community and to include them in their child's education (2010).*

Question	'Yes' responses received	'No' responses received	'Don't know' responses received
Parents: the school welcomes parents	98% (1384)	1% (141)	1% (141)
Parents: the school runs courses for parents	86% (1208)	5% (70)	9% (206)

## Conclusions

Overall, the findings in relation to how schools plan to develop and sustain partnerships with parents and others in the community are positive. It is evident that the overall impact of the programmes and initiatives is also positive. Schools display the greatest strengths in selecting and implementing strategies aimed at developing the links between the home and school. Weaknesses are evident in a small number of schools in formulating targets that are specific, measurable and time bound. The vast majority of parents report very favourably, both in questionnaires and in focus groups on their links with schools. They also report their satisfaction with the way in which schools keep them informed about their children's progress and the manner in which any difficulties are addressed.

Strategies which involve parents coming into the school to support pupils' learning have a positive effect on consolidating links between home and school. As a means of addressing issues such as problematic attendance, schools could benefit from broadening their perspectives in relation to partnership with the local community to include the range of agencies working within that community.

### What most schools are doing well:

- Communicating with parents
- Ensuring that partnerships between the home and the school are open and positive
- Ensuring that parents' views of education are becoming more positive

### What schools could do better:

- Ensure that targets set for improving partnerships with parents and the community are more specific and measurable
- Adopt a broader multi-agency approach when seeking to address issues such as attendance and the meaningful retention of children in the education system



## CHAPTER 3: SUMMARY OF DEIS EVALUATION FINDINGS

### 3.1 Summary of findings: evaluation themes and planning process

The following sections provide an overview of the findings of the evaluation in the forty-four DEIS schools in relation to the DEIS themes and the DEIS planning processes. The overall picture in relation to both the evaluation themes and the DEIS planning process is positive.

#### 3.1.1 Attendance

The overall findings relating to schools' efforts at improving pupil attendance rates are very positive. In contrast to other DEIS themes, strengths predominate in most schools regarding setting targets for improvements in pupil attendance rates. Almost all the schools report considerable success in raising overall attendance rates. Only three schools indicated that they had not succeeded in improving pupils' attendance rates. There remains, however, a significant challenge in improving the attendance rates of a core group of pupils with persistent attendance issues in DEIS schools. While almost all schools report improvements in attendance, only 16% have succeeded in improving attendance for pupils with persistent attendance problems. Pupils themselves acknowledge the fact that they sometimes stay out of schools for reasons other than sickness.

#### 3.1.2 Retention and progression

While the evaluation findings for retention and progression are positive, these must be viewed within the limits of what can be measured at primary school level. A more accurate measure of success would require the tracking of pupils to the end of post-primary senior cycle, which was beyond the scope of this evaluation. Nonetheless, most schools had effective strategies in place to support pupil retention and progression. Of particular note is the extent to which primary schools support the transition process for senior pupils to post-primary schools.

A measure of the success of the supports and strategies in place to ensure retention and progression can be gleaned through the attitude and aspirations of pupils and their parents. The fact that 77% of the pupils surveyed indicated that they intended to progress to third level and that parents, equally, are ambitious for their children is worth noting. Parents cite the creation of a positive school climate as being a factor in this. The challenge for schools is to consider the meaningful retention and progression of the most marginalised pupils, to do so from an interagency perspective and where possible to engage with post-primary schools in tracking long-term success.

#### 3.1.3 Literacy

The Inspectorate's findings in relation to action planning to improve literacy in DEIS schools in 2010<sup>18</sup> were mixed. It is evident that progress has been made since then. More recent evaluations indicate that schools are implementing strategies to improve literacy effectively and schools are reporting considerable success in improving attainment in literacy, particularly in the areas of reading and writing. Only one evaluation report refers to lack of progress in overall literacy attainment in schools evaluated in 2011 and 2014. Where reported, all other references to standards achieved are positive.

Despite the overall improvement in levels of attainment in literacy reported by schools, target setting in this area remains a challenge for a significant minority of schools (39%). In these schools, targets need to be more specific and schools need to use available data when formulating targets. In short, there should be a clear and meaningful link between the

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<sup>18</sup> Department of Education and Skills (2011) *An Evaluation of Planning Processes in DEIS Primary Schools*

outcomes of assessment in literacy, the literacy targets set, and the teaching approaches, interventions and strategies evident in the learning settings in the school.

A further challenge in relation to literacy is the development of pupils' oral language skills. The most frequently occurring recommendation in literacy in the 2011 and 2014 reports refers to this area. It may be that schools have focused on developing the pupils' reading and writing skills in the first instance as these are perceived as being easier to measure.

### **3.1.4 Numeracy**

While findings in relation to planning for improvement in numeracy are generally positive, inspectors identified weaknesses in the areas of target setting and impact and progress in a significant minority of schools (39%). Since strengths in selecting and implementing strategies to improve numeracy were identified in most schools, more effective linking of these strategies to SMART targets should assist in improving attainment levels. A considerable number of pupils did not know how they were progressing in Mathematics and a sizeable minority of pupils indicated that they did not like the subject. Despite the lack of suitable targets in many schools, the programmes offered were well-coordinated and delivered.

The findings indicate that schools need to provide a differentiated approach to the teaching of Mathematics which would ensure, in particular, that pupils of higher academic abilities are suitably challenged.

### **3.1.5 Partnership**

It is apparent that the schools involved in the DEIS evaluations have experienced success in creating a positive school climate which is welcoming both of parents and pupils. Very positive views of the school were expressed in both parental surveys and focus group discussions held with parents. In terms of planning for partnership with parents and the local community, schools have paid particular attention to how they communicate with parents and how they involve them meaningfully in the life of the school.

Less consideration has been given to the formulation of specific targets in this area. Neither was there evidence of schools giving specific attention to the development of targets and strategies for partnership with the wider community. There are instances where greater focus on developing partnerships with agencies in the community would benefit target groups of pupils in schools. For example, where there are persistent attendance issues among a minority of pupils, schools should develop appropriate targets for partnership with the agencies operating within the local community. As with all targets, these should be SMART and appropriate monitoring systems should be put in place to determine the extent of their progress and implementation.

### **3.1.6 Planning processes**

It is apparent from the evaluations that the overall quality of planning processes engaged in by the forty-four schools is good. There were many strengths evident in the schools' planning for the themes of attendance, retention and progression, and partnership. Schools report that their work in these areas contributed to improved outcomes for their pupils in terms of attendance and transfer to post-primary school. It is evident also that planning to improve literacy and numeracy is having a positive impact.

There are elements of the planning process which continue to require attention in DEIS schools. Foremost among these is the target setting process. The effective use of data and the setting of realistic and measurable targets based on available evidence persists as a challenge in schools. Such challenges, in some instances, cause difficulty when schools endeavour to report on the impact of strategies or the achievement of targets.

The role of pupils in planning processes also needs to be explored and developed further by many of the schools. Specifically with regard to accessing and taking account of pupils' perspectives on matters relating to the DEIS themes, the sharing of learning goals and targets with them, and involving them in a meaningful and appropriate way in assessing the extent to which their learning goals are being achieved. This is particularly the case for literacy and numeracy.

### 3.2 Summary of main positive features identified in the evaluations

In total, 199 summary positive findings regarding the DEIS action planning process in schools were made in the forty-four individual evaluations carried out between 2010 and 2014. Many more examples of good practice were identified within the body of the reports. Reflective of the range of school type, size and location, the subject matter of the summary positive findings is disparate. Approximately 60% of the main positive features, however, can be grouped under the headings below. The following list identifies these groups and their approximate percentage occurrence among the 199 summary positive findings:

- Leadership of the planning process (10%)
- The commitment of staff to the process (10%)
- Positive school climate (5%)
- Successful implementation of interventions (10%)
- Partnership with parents (10%)
- Impact and progress (15%)

The remaining positive findings relate to many aspects of schools' action planning process such as the provision of continuous professional development (CPD), the provision of high-quality resources and target-setting practices.

In many respects the first two headings above are inter-related and inter-dependent. The provision of high-quality leadership at all levels in the school is necessary for planning to be effective. In many instances, this leadership is provided by the principal who drives the planning agenda successfully. Also effective however, is the leadership that is provided by members of staff. Thus, the commitment of all members of the school's staff is a crucial element in ensuring improved outcomes as a result of action planning. This commitment ensures a whole-school focus on improvement and facilitates individuals to take the lead where appropriate.

Similarly, the creation of a positive school climate and the development of partnership with parents are linked. It is evident that parents have a greater presence in DEIS schools than heretofore. They also affirm the schools' efforts to create a warm and welcoming environment for their children and for them.

Finally, schools were commended for having agreed strategies and interventions which were implemented. It is interesting and heartening to note that the greatest proportion of positive findings related to monitoring the impact of interventions and the progress made towards achieving targets.

While each of the forty-four schools engages in planning for improvement in its own context, it is evident from the positive findings in individual school reports that a combination of elements leads to success. The successful DEIS primary school is one in which:

- the concept of evidence-based action-planning for improvement has taken firm root

- leadership at all levels in the school is effective
- appropriate strategies and interventions are selected for implementation on a whole-school, group and individual basis following a rigorous interrogation of available data
- the implementation of strategies and interventions is monitored closely and targets are amended as appropriate.

### 3.3 Summary of main areas for development identified in the evaluations

In total, 110 summary recommendations were made in the forty-four individual evaluation reports. As with the positive findings, a variety of recommendations were made. However, approximately 60% of the recommendations can be grouped together under the following headings:

- Targets / target setting practices (30%)
- Assessment (10%)
- Attendance (10%)
- Differentiation (10%)

The overwhelming majority of recommendations made in the areas of assessment and differentiation relate to literacy and numeracy practices. Other recommendations are also made in individual school reports. Examples of these include the need for a more specific focus on the development of the pupils' oral language skills, the need for more interagency collaboration and the need to improve specific aspects of literacy or numeracy provision.

The fact that approximately 30% of all main summary recommendations relate to targets or target-setting practices is a matter of concern. The issues are clear. Either insufficient attention is given to the range of evidence and data available to the school as it goes about setting targets, or the targets are too generic. Even where practice is regarded as being generally good, there are recommendations made relating to aspects of target-setting which require attention or improvement. The issues of target setting and assessment are linked. Schools collect a lot of data and information about their pupils' performance and learning. Teachers routinely observe pupil performance in class, they test pupils regularly and they administer standardised literacy and numeracy tests. About 10% of all summary recommendations relate to how schools could make best use of this data. Some of these recommendations relate to whole-school assessment practices, while others relate to specific elements of assessment practices.

While schools report improvements in overall attendance rates, approximately 10% of all summary recommendations refer to this area. For the most part, these centre on specific aspects of attendance such as the need to improve the attendance rates of girls or the need to focus on targeted groups of pupils.

Recommendations related to differentiation are linked to the issue of teacher expectations. It is evident from some individual school reports that some pupils, particularly those of higher academic ability, need to be offered a programme which challenges them more effectively. In implementing their programmes of work, particularly in numeracy, teachers should ensure that they meet the needs of all pupils in their classes.

## CHAPTER 4: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### 4.1 Conclusions

- It is evident that engagement with action planning for improvement in DEIS schools is having a positive impact. During evaluations, schools reported improvements in many aspects of the DEIS themes, including attendance, literacy and numeracy. Parents and pupils also displayed appropriately high expectations of progressing to second level and beyond.
- Collaborative planning has resulted in the adoption of effective whole-school practices, which have assisted in bringing about improvements in the DEIS themes.
- In spite of evidence of overall improvements, schools continue to face challenges in addressing aspects of the DEIS themes. These include: the attendance levels of pupils with persistently poor attendance; pupils' oral language development; providing appropriate challenge to pupils of higher academic ability particularly in Mathematics; and the adoption of better links with the full range of agencies operating in the schools' localities.
- The forty-four DEIS evaluations highlight the importance of effective school leadership, at all levels, in action planning for improvement in DEIS schools. Where planning was effective the process was well led.
- It is apparent that the DEIS schools evaluated have successfully nurtured a climate which is positive. Parents reported feeling welcome in the school and the majority of pupils liked coming to school. Allied to the creation of a warm and welcoming environment, parents and pupils in the forty-four DEIS schools demonstrated high expectations in relation to progression through the education system. The fact that almost all parents expect their children to stay in school to complete the Leaving Cert and that most pupils in these schools have a stated ambition to progress to third level reflects well on their engagement with education in primary school.
- There is a clear link between school self-evaluation, which is now a requirement in all schools, and DEIS action planning for improvement. These evaluations suggest that effective action-planning in the DEIS schools, which has led to improvements across the DEIS themes is supported by and closely aligned with good self-evaluation processes. Challenges common to both that still need to be overcome in DEIS schools include the effective use of evidence to provide baseline information; using available data to assist in setting targets; and setting SMART targets, which will enable schools to measure progress reliably.

### 4.2 Key recommendations

#### **Recommendation 1:**

#### **Build capacity in DEIS schools for improvement planning and self-evaluation**

Evaluations of DEIS action planning for improvement in 2010 indicated the challenges faced by schools in using available data and setting clear targets for improvements. Since then, the Inspectorate has developed guidelines and materials to support school self-evaluation and inspectors and support service personnel have conducted seminars for and advisory visits to schools. In spite of this support, it is evident that DEIS schools need further support to continue building capacity in the area of self-evaluation and action-planning for improvement. In order to develop a deeper understanding of the self-evaluation process and of the importance of purposeful target setting as an integral element of planning for improvement:

- It is recommended that all those charged with providing support for planning to DEIS schools, heighten their awareness of the aspects of effective practice common to both

DEIS planning and school self-evaluation (SSE). This will enable them to provide guidance on effective implementation of the requirements of both. Future inputs from the support services and advice from the Inspectorate should serve to clarify the aspects of SSE which are already being addressed by DEIS schools and should indicate the additional elements required as part of the SSE process.

- It is recommended that all stakeholders - the Department of Education and Skills, school managements and management bodies, school leaders and their organisations, and the support services - use the embedding of school self-evaluation processes as an opportunity to build the necessary capacity in DEIS schools and to promote professional and collaborative practice.

### **Recommendation 2:**

#### **Build school leadership capacity**

The evaluation reports highlight the importance of effective school leadership, at all levels, in the DEIS action-planning process. Where DEIS action planning resulted in improved outcomes for pupils, effective leadership was provided by the school principal and others with leadership responsibility. Leading for improvement, with its attendant challenges and opportunities, requires an understanding of how to distribute leadership and of the importance of building leadership capacity. Therefore:

- It is recommended that all those responsible for supporting school leaders in DEIS schools critically appraise the level of support they are offering, given the crucial nature of the school leadership role. School patrons, trustees and boards should ensure that leadership roles are clear and that leadership responsibility is appropriately assigned, shared and supported.
- It is recommended that a structured route to school leadership positions be developed in the education system for the benefit of all schools, but especially DEIS schools. This will require policy decisions about recruitment, professional development and employment of school leaders, in which the Department of Education and Skills should take a lead role.
- It is recommended that structures be put in place to ensure the availability of high-quality professional development for potential school leaders prior to appointment, for newly-appointed school leaders, and thereafter on a continuing basis to maintain and deepen skills. This will require a renewed focus on the education and professional development of school leaders by policy makers within the Department of Education and Skills, management and leadership bodies, support services, colleges and the network of education centres. It will also require particular attention to the specific needs of DEIS schools.

### **Recommendation 3:**

#### **Address specific DEIS themes where weaknesses persist**

While there are many strengths identified in improving practice and outcomes across the DEIS themes in the forty-four schools, some challenges remain. Schools have addressed to a great extent, issues related to attendance and have created positive learning environments which build the confidence of pupils and their parents in the opportunities offered by remaining in school. However, the potential to utilise a multi-agency approach offers schools further opportunities to address challenges in the DEIS themes of attendance, retention and progression. In particular, such an approach could assist schools in their efforts to meet the challenge posed by pupils who have persistent attendance problems.

Schools report considerable progress in improving pupils' attainment levels in literacy and progress is evident to a lesser degree in numeracy. However, in the DEIS themes of both literacy and numeracy, a small number of concerns persist. It is apparent that schools have successfully focused on raising pupils' reading and writing skills but have been less effective

in developing pupils' oral language skills. In numeracy and Mathematics, while most schools display strengths in selecting and implementing strategies, the impact of these on attainment is not yet evident in a significant minority of schools. One area of concern highlighted by the evaluations is the need for schools to cater more effectively for individual difference in relation to numeracy. In particular, the needs of pupils of higher academic ability need to be addressed. To address the identified weaknesses in these specific themes:

- It is recommended that schools adopt a broader multi-agency approach when seeking to address issues such as attendance and the successful retention of pupils in the education system. Particular focus should be placed on those pupils identified with persistent attendance problems and those who are most at risk of dropping out of education. This will require the building of effective and productive relationships with services available locally, as well as continuing, and improving where appropriate, engagement with the support available through the School Completion Programme.
- It is recommended that schools place a greater focus on oral language when engaging in planning for improvement in literacy, with a view to improving outcomes in this area for pupils. It is further recommended that the support services working with DEIS schools ensure that schools are aware of the full range of resources available for this purpose and that the supports provided in relation to literacy spans all elements of literacy skills, along with the integration of these skills.
- It is recommended that schools continue or renew, where relevant, their efforts to provide suitable differentiated programmes in the area of numeracy and Mathematics. While ensuring that the numeracy needs of all pupils are suitably addressed, schools should place a greater focus on improving the attainment levels of pupils of higher academic abilities. It is further recommended that those providing support and advice to schools assist schools in implementing a differentiated approach to improving numeracy and Mathematics by indicating materials, including ICT programmes, that could be useful and by assisting in developing practices that enable all pupils to make progress according to their ability.

#### **Recommendation 4:**

##### **Improve co-ordination and accountability in DEIS schools**

Co-ordination and accountability are, in the first instance, functions of school leaders. The principle of subsidiarity, meaning that decisions are made at a level closest to where they will have an impact, underlies the way in which additional resources are directed to DEIS schools, and gives school managements a high level of autonomy. Co-ordinating the range of supports available to DEIS schools requires a focus on both the supports provided to schools directly and those provided through structures such as the School Completion Programme (SCP) clusters. Therefore:

- It is recommended that the additional resources and personnel made available to DEIS schools be deployed for optimal effectiveness. These resources should be co-ordinated efficiently to eliminate any duplication or gaps in provision.
- It is recommended that in their DEIS action plans, schools clearly define and document the roles of both school-based and external personnel within DEIS, and that school leaders ensure that reliable reporting mechanisms are in place.
- It is recommended that principals use their participation in the local SCP steering committees to ensure that SCP-derived support is delivered in an effective, targeted and sustained manner. The steering committees should plan for various contingencies and take the actions they deem necessary to ensure the maintenance of support for targeted pupils.

## APPENDIX 1: DEIS ACTION PLANNING: GUIDE TO DESCRIPTORS

	Target setting	Selection of strategies	Implementation of strategies	Monitoring of impact and progress
<b>4</b>	<p>The school has gathered and analysed appropriate data. Conclusions have been drawn, identifying specific areas as priorities for improvement and development.</p> <p>Realistic and evidenced-based targets for improvement have been set. Suitable whole-school and relevant interventions or strategies are linked to the achievement of specific targets and are identified for all or targeted students.</p> <p>Roles and responsibilities for all aspects of the planning process (data gathering and analysis, target setting) are clearly defined and assigned. Structures are in place to manage this process and to enable this to be a whole-school process. Timescales and success criteria have been named.</p>	<p>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 pupils.</p> <p>All staff aware of interventions and strategies and familiar with their aims and purpose.</p> <p>Identified strategies and interventions are fit for purpose and very relevant to school population.</p>	<p>Effective planning has carried through to effective implementation on a whole-school basis. Implementation is clearly directed to achieving the set targets. Staff, pupils and parents are aware of interventions and strategies. Staff uses interventions and strategies appropriately. Appropriate CPD has been provided to ensure whole-school implementation of strategies and achievement of targets.</p>	<p>Staff understands how progress will be measured. Appropriate data is used to measure progress made towards the achievement of the targets. There is clear evidence of progress made in the targeted area. There has been ongoing monitoring of progress. Where necessary targets have been adjusted. Staff is informed about whole-school progress and is involved in revising targets and or strategies. Impact and progress are communicated to parents and students as appropriate.</p>
<b>3</b>	<p>In relation to data, while the processes and structures are generally sound and in line with those described at 4 above, certain gaps or deficiencies are evident. The targets set and the strategies devised to achieve the targets are generally sound. Certain linkages between targets, strategies and structures are lacking in some respects. There may be some lack of clarity regarding timescale or success criteria.</p>	<p>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.</p>	<p>Implementation is generally effective and focused on achieving targets. Communication, understanding and focus, on a whole-school basis, regarding interventions and strategies are generally sound. Certain gaps and deficiencies that impinge on effective implementation of strategies exist.</p>	<p>The measurement of progress is generally effective. There is evidence of progress in targeted areas. Certain gaps and deficiencies may exist in monitoring progress and or adjusting targets where necessary. Some gaps may exist regarding communication of progress.</p>
<b>2</b>	<p>While processes and structures exist in relation to data, their effectiveness is compromised to a considerable degree by, for example, a failure to engage in all areas prioritised in DEIS planning.</p> <p>A minority of the targets set, and the related strategies and structures devised to deliver them, are sound. There is a lack of clarity regarding timescale, responsibility and or success criteria</p>	<p>School has too many or too few interventions and strategies to serve the needs of targeted groups or all pupils. Most staff are not familiar with specific purpose of each intervention and strategy. Principal has no overview of all interventions and strategies in use in the school.</p>	<p>Considerable gaps and deficiencies in the implementation of strategies exist. There are considerable gaps in communication and or understanding and or focus on a whole-school basis regarding interventions and strategies</p>	<p>There is limited evidence of progress in targeted areas. The measurement of progress is generally ineffective. Gaps and deficiencies exist in monitoring progress and adjusting targets where necessary. Gaps exist regarding communication of progress.</p>
<b>1</b>	<p>There are significant weaknesses in gathering and analysing appropriate data. Conclusions, where drawn are inadequate or unsound. Roles and responsibilities in relation to data are not defined and structures are unsound or absent.</p> <p>Few or none of the targets set, and the related strategies and structures devised to deliver them, are sound. There are no clear links between targets, strategies and structures.</p>	<p>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.</p>	<p>There are significant gaps and deficiencies in the implementation of strategies. Communication and or understanding and or focus on a whole-school basis regarding interventions and strategies have significant weaknesses.</p>	<p>There is little or no evidence of progress made in targeted areas. The measurement of progress is ineffective. Monitoring of progress is defective or non-existent. There is little or no adjustment of targets. Communication of progress is poor or non-existent.</p>