

## Y Pwyllgor Plant, Pobl Ifanc ac Addysg

### Children, Young People and Education Committee

Jeremy Miles MS  
Minister for Education and Welsh Language

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### PISA results

Dear Jeremy,

We are writing about the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) results, announced on 5 December, and the broader issue of school improvement and raising standards.

The PISA results

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As you acknowledged in your [statement](#), Wales' results in the 2022 PISA cycle are disappointing, particularly given the improvement shown in the 2018 cycle. We note that:

- Wales' scores decreased in all three subject domains of mathematics, reading and science. In all three cases, the decrease was statistically significant and was larger than the decrease in scores of the other three UK nations.
- Wales' scores are significantly lower than the OECD average; this coming after Wales had 'caught up' with the OECD average in 2018.
- Wales' scores remain the lowest in the UK, across all three subject domains.
- Wales would have missed the target of achieving 500 points in each of the three subject domains, set in 2014 and discontinued in 2022, by some distance. It would have also missed

the original target, set in 2011 and discontinued in 2014, of being among the top 20 'ranked' nations in PISA.<sup>1</sup>

In looking at attainment gaps, we note that the gap in performance between pupils from the most disadvantaged backgrounds and the least disadvantaged backgrounds was smaller in Wales than on average across OECD countries in all three domains. We also note that Wales had more "academically resilient" learners – that is being in the bottom quarter of PISA's economic, social and cultural status (ESCS) index but performing in the top quarter. However, there remain considerable gaps between pupils eligible for free school meals and other pupils – 48 points in mathematics, 42 points in reading and 48 points in science. We can see that in reading this has widened from 34 points in 2018.<sup>2</sup>

Wales had fewer higher achievers in PISA than other countries. The proportion of learners in Wales who performed at the highest proficiency levels, Level 5 or 6, was:

- 6% in mathematics, significantly lower than the OECD average of 9%;
- 5% in reading, significantly lower than the OECD average of 7%; and
- 6% in science, significantly lower than the OECD average of 7%.<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, the results for Wales show the gap between the highest performing (90<sup>th</sup> percentile) and lower performing (10<sup>th</sup> percentile) pupils in PISA widened in all three domains in 2022, compared to 2018. Regrettably, this does not reflect improvement among our highest achievers but a greater decline in the lowest achievers than the decline in our highest achievers. (However, the 90<sup>th</sup> percentile score in science did remain the same.) The gap is, however, narrower than in the other three UK nations in mathematics and science. Again, this is due to the difference between our highest achievers being greater than the difference between our lowest achievers.<sup>4</sup>

1. We would welcome your views on any further thinking you have had on what needs to be done to address some of these issues.

## Other measures of education performance

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We are well aware that PISA is of course not the only measure of educational performance. The qualifications young people gain when leaving school or college continue to serve as a very significant measure of this. It is therefore disappointing to see that GCSE data for 2023, published last

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<sup>1</sup> [Welsh Government, PISA 2022: National Report for Wales, research report, December 2023](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Welsh Government, PISA 2022: National Report for Wales, research report, December 2023](#)

<sup>3</sup> [Welsh Government, PISA 2022: National Report for Wales, research report, December 2023](#)

<sup>4</sup> [Welsh Government, PISA 2022: National Report for Wales, research report, December 2023](#)

week, shows that the deprivation attainment gap has widened during the pandemic (2018/19 to 2022/23), having already widened in the last few years prior to the pandemic (2015/16 to 2018/19):

- The difference between the proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals (eFSM) and other pupils, achieving GCSE grades A\*-A, widened from 14.6 percentage points in 2015/16 to 14.8 percentage points in 2018/19, and to 16.7 percentage points in 2022/23.
- The difference between the proportion of pupils eFSM and other pupils, achieving GCSE grades A\*-C, widened from 24.9 percentage points in 2015/16 to 28.1 percentage points in 2018/19, and to 29.8 percentage points in 2022/23.
- The difference between the proportion of pupils eFSM, achieving GCSE grades A\*-G, widened from 2.6 percentage points in 2015/16 to 5.7 percentage points in 2018/19, and to 7.7 percentage points in 2022/23.<sup>5</sup>

Other recently published data on the personalised assessments taken by pupils in Years 2 to 9 also showed a decline, coinciding with the pandemic, in reading and numeracy levels.<sup>6</sup> We note that, in light of this, you published a new Mathematics and Numeracy Plan<sup>7</sup>, and an updated oracy and reading toolkit<sup>8</sup>.

The decline was particularly the case in Welsh where pupils' reading levels in 2022/23 were on average 11 months behind those of pupils of the same age in 2020/21 (the decline was four months in the case of English reading).

2. Have you identified the reasons behind this difference in performance in English and Welsh?

3. What steps are you taking to address and narrow the gap?

## Our work

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As you are aware, we are undertaking a Senedd long piece of work scrutinising implementation of the key education reforms, the new curriculum and ALN. We acknowledge that these are key tools in driving improvements in the Welsh education system. We also know that for many years there have been efforts geared towards raising standards and narrowing inequalities, as currently reflected by the Programme for Government objective and your "national mission" of "high standards and aspirations for all".

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<sup>5</sup> [Welsh Government, Examination results, September 2022 to August 2023 \(provisional\), 5 October 2023](#).

<sup>6</sup> [Welsh Government, Patterns in reading and numeracy attainment: from 2018/19 to 2022/23, 23 November 2023](#).

<sup>7</sup> [Welsh Government, Mathematics and numeracy plan 2023, 29 November 2023](#).

<sup>8</sup> [Welsh Government, Written Statement: Whole School Approach to Oracy and Reading, 23 March 2023](#).

In addition to our ongoing scrutiny of curriculum and ALN reform, we are likely to do some specific work looking at school standards. However, before we start that work, we have invited you to a general scrutiny session on 28 February 2024. It would be helpful to have your response to this letter before this session, particularly your response to the observations made here, particularly now you have had opportunity to analyse and reflect on the PISA results. We would therefore appreciate a response by Friday 17 February.

Yours sincerely,



Jayne Bryant MS  
Chair

Croesewir gohebiaeth yn Gymraeg neu Saesneg.

We welcome correspondence in Welsh or English.