

# Has devolution delivered for students?

Siân Hughes

**The Welsh Government has pursued distinctive education policies, but recent evidence has shown that pupils' standards are falling further behind their UK and international counterparts.**

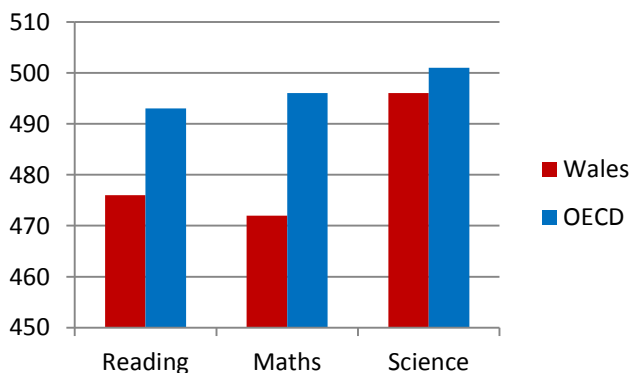
Since 1999, successive Welsh Governments have developed distinctive education policies. These include:

- a commitment to the comprehensive education system;
- the introduction of the Foundation Phase;
- learning Pathways for 14-19 year-olds;
- the introduction of the Welsh Baccalaureate; and
- the abolition of school performance tables and compulsory testing at the end of Key Stages 1-3.

While there has been a rise in the standards of examination results, serious problems have become apparent in the education system in Wales.

*Two significant publications have shown that standards in Wales are not all that they could be*

**Wales and OECD mean PISA scores**



Source: NFER

## PISA

PISA is an internationally standardised assessment that surveys 15-year-olds in the principal industrialised countries. Every three years it assesses how far students near the end of compulsory education have acquired some of the knowledge and skills essential for full participation in society.

## How is Wales performing?

In a double whammy, two significant publications have shown that standards in Wales are not all that they could be. Estyn's 2009-10 annual report summarises educational progress over a period of six years and concludes that:

- improvements in standards in education have been slow;
- one in three schools is underperforming;
- the performance gap between Wales and England has grown;
- systems to track learners' progress are not good enough;
- literacy and numeracy skills are not being developed fully.

The OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) tested and compared Welsh pupils' skills in reading, maths and science with other countries.

The results were disappointing. Of 67 countries, Wales ranked 38 in reading, 40 in maths and 30 in science. Not only were Wales' students performing worse than UK counterparts and below the OECD average (significantly below the

average in reading and maths), the results were worse than they were in 2006.

## Where did it go wrong?

The Minister for Children, Education and Lifelong Learning at the time said that the results could not be blamed on socio-economic or bilingual factors or on relative funding differences, in particular he highlighted the following issues:

- failure of leadership throughout the system;
- too much learner choice and a need to focus on strategic subjects and key skills;
- complacency;
- a search for alibis instead of learning from best practice;
- a lack of focus and weak policy implementation from the Department for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills (DCELLS);
- fragmentation of local education authorities;
- lack of robust teacher assessments; and
- lack of school governors' accountability.

## A formidable agenda for the future

The previous Minister published a twenty point plan for immediate action which had serious messages for the education sector.

DCELLS itself has been reorganised with performance as the driver. There will be fewer initiatives and local authorities will work in consortia arrangements.

There was a strong emphasis on literacy and numeracy – there will be national reading tests and a focus on 7 to 11 year-olds with similar plans for numeracy. The focus on literacy and numeracy will apply to heads, teachers and trainee teachers too, with in service training, entry and exit tests for trainee teachers and firm foundations on literacy and numeracy in induction.

There will be a refocus on pupil attendance and behaviour in the classroom and robust and consistent assessment at Key Stage 2 and an integration of PISA assessments into schools.

Governing bodies must discuss their schools' performance data and set out their plans to improve or else fail their Estyn inspection.

More controversially, there will be annual grading for schools with floor targets which must be met along with progress targets.

Irredeemable, failing schools will be closed.

In the Minister's words, there will be no hiding place for poor performance.

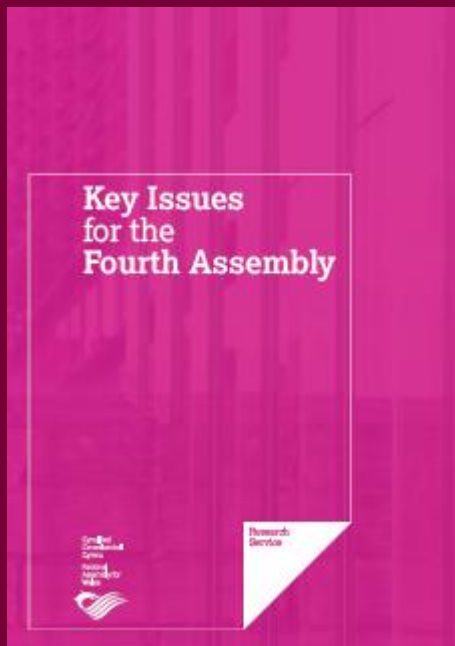
## The initial response

The response from teaching unions has been mixed. While there has been support for a renewed focus on literacy and numeracy and plans to tackle poor behaviour, the Minister's response to PISA has been called a knee-jerk and unnecessary over-reaction. The plans have been called draconian and punitive for teachers. There are complaints that the ideas are too vague.

The Minister wants Wales to be in the top twenty rather than in the thirties in the 2015 PISA assessment. He has set out an ambitious, forthright and formidable agenda for the Fourth Assembly.

Estyn say that the challenges can only be tackled effectively by more joint working and unions are concerned that reform will be imposed and want proper consultation and co-operation. This will be a profound challenge for all those who are responsible for ensuring that Wales does not fail its pupils.

# Article taken from Research Service publication



## Key Issues for the Fourth Assembly

This document has been specially prepared for Assembly Members by the Research Service. It sets out some of the key issues likely to matter to Members during the Fourth Assembly.

[Key Issues for the Fourth Assembly](#)

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