

Today sees the publication of the 2022 PISA results. These are not the results we would like to see.

While the results are disappointing, the crucial thing is to understand what they tell us. For that I believe it is important to look at the wider context in which PISA was reported.

As members know, these tests were conducted in 2022 when the effects of the pandemic were still acute and education had been severely disrupted by covid.

Wales is not alone in this. Covid has affected the performance of countries across the world.

Since 2018, average performance in OECD countries has decreased by 10 points in reading and almost 15 points in maths.

Germany, Iceland, the Netherlands, Norway and Poland all saw a drop of at least 25 points in maths. To provide some broad context.

Wales has achieved similar results to Norway and the US for maths. For science, Wales is again similar to Norway. Whilst in reading, we are similar to France and the Netherlands.

Closer to home, every country in the UK has seen a decline in performance. However, the OECD are clear that we need to exercise some caution in making comparisons with England and Scotland, due to what they describe as 'upwards bias'. The OECD estimates their results could be overstated by 7-9 points. That said, I recognise that Wales is behind.

In 2018, before the pandemic, we had started to see strong improvement in literacy and numeracy standards, thanks to the hard work of our teaching workforce. We were the only country in the UK to improve in all three PISA domains.

Covid has derailed this improvement.

As education minister, I've raised time and time again my concerns regarding the long term impact of the pandemic. Behaviour, attendance, and engagement with learning – these have all been affected by the pandemic and we are not alone in saying this. These concerns were also reflected in the national data we published recently.

Across the world, school absence is higher than it was pre-pandemic. It is no wonder that literacy, numeracy and science attainment has been impacted if too many pupils are missing school. In disadvantaged areas, we know this problem is exacerbated.

There are often complex and multiple factors lying behind non-attendance. We have invested heavily to support schools, such as funding for more family engagement officers. But more support is needed.

Our national attendance taskforce met yesterday and will meet again in January. This will help us think creatively, across the system, to find solutions to issues that require influence and input beyond the education sector.

Our long-term education reforms have just started after years of planning, but as the OECD point out, improvement in education takes time. The analyses published today highlight the importance of resilient systems in supporting learning. OECD describe these as systems as those which provide autonomy for school leaders to design a curriculum and an emphasis on self-evaluation, but with clear quality assurance and accountability mechanisms. Our curriculum for Wales is such a system. It has now been introduced in all schools in Wales, as of this year, though the learners who sat PISA tests last year will not have had access to the new curriculum.

Our new curriculum and approach to education has been supported and encouraged by the OECD reflecting their advice about how to make sure an education system is fit for the future. They highlight the importance of resilience, equity, learning and wellbeing – all of which are central to our new curriculum.

We've drawn on international evidence in particular from OECD to ensure our expectations align with what works. International evidence is clear that high quality learning needs to be supported by professional learning and school improvement over time to support schools in a challenging climate for all professionals. This is what we will prioritise.

This PISA cycle has not assessed learning under the curriculum for Wales. However, their report will help us to strengthen support for schools and learners on the reform journey.

Throughout this time i have listened to and spoken with heads, with teachers and with unions. All of whom share my concerns regarding literacy and numeracy standards since the pandemic.

These core skills must be an absolute national priority. And whilst the report today shows that the gap between our most and least disadvantaged learners is smaller than the OECD average, this sets our challenge as being about stretching our more able young people as well as supporting all learners.

The Curriculum for Wales sets out a made-for-Wales evidence-based area of learning and experience for maths and numeracy. It also provides a framework for learners to develop their number skills throughout the curriculum.

In realising the curriculum, we will support educators to develop approaches which support all learners to be confident in using and applying their maths and numeracy skills.

Our oracy and reading toolkit provides a package of support to schools and practitioners to identify opportunities to achieve high standards of listening, speaking and reading. Our recent update to the toolkit reinforces my commitment to the

systematic and consistent teaching of phonics, as set out in our high standards and aspirations for all action plan.

We know that excellent teachers are the key to good education, and we will support our teachers to focus on teaching and create time for their own professional learning by continuing our work with unions and our other education partners to reduce workload.

Driving up standards in reading, maths and science requires a system response from all education leaders in Wales. In January, i will bring all our partners together to develop a Wales-wide plan, to ensure we have a shared and comprehensive response to this challenge.

Our education workforce do incredible work in supporting our pupils, but the reality is that over a decade of austerity continues to make their job harder. My focus remains on doing everything i can to protect front line services – giving our teachers the tools they need to do the best job possible.

To conclude, children may no longer be learning on a screen due to a positive covid test, but the effects of the pandemic are still with us. The after-effect of the pandemic and rising poverty, have placed our schools at the frontline of a crisis beyond education.

I cannot hide my disappointment with today's results. But they make me more determined than ever to get this right – we in Wales have large scale reforms that have only just started to be rolled out. These reforms, with a renewed focus on literacy and numeracy, will be essential in supporting our pupils and schools so that every learner, no matter their background, can reach their full potential.