

The Welsh Education Reform Journey

A RAPID POLICY ASSESSMENT



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Foreword

An education system in which all learners have an equal opportunity to reach their potential can strengthen individuals' and societies' capacity to contribute to economic growth and social cohesion. Wales is committed to providing high-quality and inclusive education for all Welsh citizens. The disappointing PISA 2009 results however showed Wales was far removed from realising this commitment and sparked a national debate on the quality and future of education in Wales. This resulted in a broad consensus on the need for change. In 2011 Wales embarked on a large-scale school improvement reform and introduced a range of policies to improve the quality and equity of its school system. These were reviewed in the 2014 OECD report *Improving Schools in Wales: An OECD Perspective*. Subsequently, the Welsh Government in 2016 invited the OECD to conduct an "education rapid policy assessment" to propose recommendations to further strengthen Wales' reform efforts.

This report comes at a key moment in Wales' education reform journey as the country finds itself in the midst of a number of important changes, including a large-scale curriculum reform, a reform of initial teacher education and the revision of its education strategy. Since 2014, the OECD has witnessed progress in several policy areas and a shift in the Welsh approach to school improvement away from a piecemeal and short-term policy orientation towards one that is guided by a long-term vision and characterised by a process of co-construction with key stakeholders. The commitment to improving the teaching and learning in Wales's schools is visible at all levels of the education system.

Sustaining this commitment and the general support for the reforms Wales has embarked on in recent years will be central to realising the country's ambitions for education and society over the long term. To this end, it is important that Wales continues bringing further coherence across the various reform initiatives and using evidence to ensure effective implementation. This calls for strengthening some of the implementation processes that underpin its reform journey, as well as several policy areas: the development of a high-quality teaching profession, making leadership a key driver of education reform, ensuring equity in learning opportunities and student well-being, and moving towards a new system of assessment, evaluation and accountability.

I hope this report will support Wales in its reform efforts and ultimately in realising the country's commitment to providing all children with the knowledge, skills and values that they need to succeed in tomorrow's world. The OECD is here to help Wales rise to this challenge.



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The team of authors included Beatriz Pont, Marco Kools and Caitlyn Guthrie (Annex B). Within the OECD, the team has relied on valuable support and advice from Andreas Schleicher, Montserrat Gomendio and Paulo Santiago. Our thanks go to Célia Braga-Schich who provided administrative support, Sally Hinchcliffe who edited the report and Marta Rilling who organised the publication process.

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Acronyms and abbreviations

A-Level	Advanced Level
CSC	Central South Consortium
DfE	Department for Education (Wales)
EAS	Education Achievement Service
EOTAS	Educated other than at school
ERW	Ein Rhanbarth ar Waith,
FSM	Free school meals
GCSE	General Certificate of Secondary Education
GwE	Gwasanaeth Effeithiolrwydd
ICT	information and communications technology
ITE	Initial teacher education
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
STEM	science, technology, engineering and mathematics

Executive summary

An education system in which all learners have an equal opportunity to reach their potential can strengthen individuals' and societies' capacity to contribute to economic growth and social cohesion. After its significantly lower than average performance in the 2009 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), Wales in 2011 embarked on a large-scale school improvement reform aimed at improving the quality and equity of its school system. To support these efforts, the Welsh Government invited the OECD to conduct a review of its school system. The resulting report, *Improving Schools in Wales: An OECD Perspective* (2014a), provided a number of policy recommendations to contribute towards shaping a long-term vision for the Welsh education system. Building on the 2014 OECD review and several other research reports, Wales developed an education vision and a strategic plan to move towards realising that vision, *Qualified for Life: An Education Improvement Plan*, published in 2014. The ongoing curriculum reform has allowed this vision of the Welsh learner to be further refined.

In 2016, the Welsh Government invited the OECD to take stock through an education rapid policy assessment. This report, *The Welsh Education Reform Journey*, analyses the reforms adopted since 2014 and offers recommendations to inform next steps. The Welsh approach to school improvement has moved from a piecemeal and short-term policy orientation towards one that is guided by a longer-term vision and is characterised by a process of co-construction with key stakeholders. To support the realisation of its education objectives and ultimately its vision of the Welsh learner, Wales should continue its curriculum reform efforts underpinned by sustained investments in key policy areas and strengthen the implementation process to ensure that its reform journey is comprehensive and effective.

Progress has been made in certain policy areas, including the various measures taken to support the professional learning of teachers, the increase in school-to-school collaborations and participation in networks, the rationalisation of school grants, the development of a national school categorisation system and the steps taken in developing a new, 21st century curriculum. The latter has allowed for further refining Wales' education vision in that all Welsh learners are to develop as ambitious capable and lifelong learners, enterprising and creative, informed citizens and healthy and confident individuals. Realising this vision however calls for further policy attention in the following areas:

- **Developing a high quality teaching profession.** Continue developing a national approach to professional learning across all career stages and build capacity for implementation of the new curriculum, focusing on teachers' formative assessment and differentiated teaching skills. Continue with the initial teacher education reforms, including the promotion of strong partnerships between initial teacher education institutions and schools.
- **Making leadership development a prime driver of the Welsh education strategy.** Move forward with the establishment of the National Academy of

Educational Leadership. Speed up development of leadership standards and the professional learning offer for (aspiring) leaders. Ensure that these policies are aligned with the new teaching standards and the Welsh school as a learning organisation model under development. Promote the use of highly skilled business managers for schools, or group of schools, to reduce the administrative burden on school leaders so they can focus on educational leadership and developing their schools into learning organisations and through this ensure the “readiness” of staff to deliver the new curriculum.

- **Supporting the realisation of the national commitment to equity.** Consider moving towards a national needs-based school-funding formula that ensures the effective allocation of funds to schools. Expand the mandate of regional consortia to include responsibility for supporting students with additional learning needs. Invest more in support staff who are involved in teaching and learning.
- **Moving forward with the development of the new assessment and evaluation framework.** Continue investing in the formative assessment and data-handling skills of teachers and school leaders. Ensure greater synergies between the national school categorisation system and the new inspection framework under development. As part of the evaluation and assessment framework, consider including a national approach to identifying and celebrating good practices, driven by school self-evaluations.

The Welsh education reform journey has set into motion a new approach to policy design and implementation, characterised by a move towards the co-construction of policies guided by a vision of the Welsh learner and a school improvement strategy. There is a risk of the journey becoming piece meal, not reaching its objectives and with different actors going their own way if additional reforms and activities are introduced that may divert energy from the realisation of objectives. To ensure Wales’s reform agenda has the desired results, it is vital to strengthen the implementation process by:

- **Bringing further coherence across the various reform initiatives.** Together with key stakeholders, the Welsh Government should clarify how different reforms and policies relate to each other and contribute to realising the shared vision of the Welsh learner, resulting in a coherent and adequately resourced implementation plan. This exercise should be repeated regularly as Wales advances in its education reform journey. The role of the Change Board could be essential to this process.
- **Continuing the process of co-constructing policies with key stakeholders.** In managing the process of co-construction, there is scope to further clarify and consolidate the roles and responsibilities of different actors. This includes making explicit how teachers, school leaders, local authorities, regional consortia and other stakeholders each contribute to realising the vision of the Welsh learner.
- **Continue strengthening Wales’ school improvement infrastructure.** Regional consortia should continue 1) to invest in their own capacity and strengthen the evidence base for their school improvement services and 2) co-ordinate and collaborate among themselves, enhancing consistency in the quality of services. Teacher education institutions should be encouraged to work with regional consortia to support school improvement efforts.

- **Further enhancing the use of evidence and research and its link to policy.**
Wales should continue to invest in building research and assessment capacity at all levels of the system, which will be essential for the successful implementation of the curriculum reform. This calls for evaluation of the different policies of the reform journey to understand their progress and impact; these evaluation efforts should be guided by the assessment and evaluation framework under development.
- **Clearly communicating about the Welsh education reform journey.**
There needs to be an easy-to-understand narrative about how the different policies of the Welsh education reform journey relate to one another and contribute to realising the vision of the Welsh learner. Wales should monitor, evaluate and celebrate the achievement of key milestones to maintain enthusiasm and engagement. It needs to pay particular attention to communicating clearly the emerging assessment and evaluation framework, as it will drive behaviour. This will give teachers and school leaders the confidence to start changing their practices and become more innovative as the school system makes the transition from the old curriculum and assessment framework to the new.

Chapter 1.

An overview of the Welsh education policy context

The disappointing PISA 2009 results sparked a national debate on the quality and future of education in Wales. This resulted in a broad consensus on the need for change. Wales consequently embarked on a large-scale school improvement reform. In 2016, the Welsh Government invited the OECD to take stock of the policies and reforms adopted since the 2014 OECD review “Improving Schools in Wales: An OECD Perspective”.

The Welsh school system is relatively small, with compulsory education for 5-16 year-olds but with many beginning their education at the age of 4 and continuing beyond the age of 16. Education is delivered in Welsh-medium, English-medium and/or bilingual settings and a new curriculum is now in process of development. The Welsh Government is responsible for administering all levels of education, except for further and higher education. There are 22 local authorities responsible for publicly funded schools and supporting vulnerable students. Four regional consortia were established in 2012 to focus on developing school improvement functions. With this backdrop, this education rapid policy assessment looks into the range of reforms the Welsh Government have adopted to address the challenges identified in 2014 and offers recommendations to inform next steps.

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Introduction and background to the report

An education system in which all learners have an equal opportunity to reach their potential can strengthen individuals' and societies' capacity to contribute to economic growth and social cohesion. In 2011, after 15-year-olds in Wales showed significantly lower than average performance in the 2009 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), Wales embarked on a large-scale school improvement reform and introduced a range of policies to improve the quality and equity of its school system. Education reform has since become a national priority in Wales and actors at all levels are committed to achieving system-wide improvement.

In support of these initial reform efforts, the Welsh Government invited the OECD to conduct a review of its school system. The resulting report, *Improving Schools in Wales: An OECD Perspective* (OECD, 2014a) analysed the strengths and challenges of the Welsh school system, and provided a number of policy recommendations for further strengthening it. The OECD recommended that Wales develop a long-term and sustainable school improvement strategy by investing in the teaching and school leadership profession, ensuring that schools and their staff can respond to the learning needs of all students, and establishing a coherent evaluation and assessment framework to underpin the school system. A complete summary of these policy recommendations can be found in Annex C and an overview of the strengths and challenges identified at the time of the 2014 review are discussed in greater depth below.

Building on the 2014 OECD review and several other research reports, Wales set into motion a number of education reforms. In September 2016, the Welsh Government invited the OECD back to Wales to undertake an “education rapid policy assessment” to take stock of the reforms initiated in recent years (see Box 1.1). This report analyses the most prominent reforms in light of the policy advice provided by the OECD, provides feedback on progress to date and offers recommendations to inform the next steps. This assessment aims to help Wales maintain and build upon its reform momentum by engaging key stakeholders and focusing efforts on the implementation strategy to ensure success. It followed an abridged version of the standard OECD country review methodology: a desk study of policy documents and an assessment visit to Wales in November 2016 (see Annex A). During the visit OECD team members interviewed a range of experts and stakeholders from various levels of the education system. In addition, the team members' participation in and co-facilitation of two conferences (in September and November 2016) has allowed for further exchanges of views, experience and knowledge with many additional experts and stakeholders, thereby enriching the analysis of this assessment report.

Box 1.1. The education rapid policy assessment

An OECD education rapid policy assessment takes stock of a country's reform agenda. It provides feedback on progress made since a certain point in time and offers recommendations for strengthening both the content of policies and the process of implementation.

The assessment follows an abridged version of the standard OECD country review methodology: a desk study of policy documents and a three to five day assessment visit. During this visit an OECD team of experts interviews a range of key stakeholders from various levels of the education system.

Box 1.1. The education rapid policy assessment (*continued*)

A typical education rapid policy assessment consists of four phases, usually over four to six months. The phases are: 1) definition of scope; 2) desk review and visit to the country; 3) drafting of the report; and 4) launch of the report.

OECD education rapid policy assessments are part of the OECD's increasing efforts to strengthen the capacity of OECD member and non-member countries to successfully implement education policies and reforms.

The Welsh education context***School education and curriculum***

The Welsh school system is relatively small. In January 2016, there were approximately 467 000 students in Wales, in 13 nurseries, 1 310 primary schools, 7 middle schools (which include both primary and secondary education), 205 secondary schools and 39 special schools (Welsh Government, 2016a). Of these, 428 primary, 5 middle and 49 secondary schools were classified as Welsh medium and there were an additional 66 private (independent) schools. The student-teacher ratio was 16:1 at the secondary level and 22:1 at the primary level; compared to the OECD average of 13 and 15 respectively (Welsh Government, 2016a; OECD, 2016b).

The Welsh school system had around 27 700 qualified teachers in 2016. The number of teachers in public schools¹ in each local authority ranged between 3 044 in Cardiff, to 485 in Merthyr Tydfil. The number of support staff stands at roughly 24 000 (Welsh Government, 2016c). Students with some form of special education needs² make up approximately 23% of all students in Welsh public schools; however, only about 12% of the 23% have official statements of special education needs. The Welsh Government is in the process of transforming the existing special education system into a more unified one that is fit for purpose and better supports learners with “additional learning needs” – the preferred term in Wales nowadays – from age 0 to 25.

Education is compulsory in Wales from the age of 5 to the age of 16, but 98% of children begin their education as 4-year-olds and 80% continue beyond 16 (OECD, 2014a). The period of compulsory education is divided into four stages: Foundation Phase, Key Stage 2, Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4 (see Table 1.1).

Table 1.1. Overview of education phases, ages and International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) levels

Educational phase	Stage	Ages	ISCED 2011 level
Early years/primary	Foundation Phase	3-7	ISCED 0 and 1
Primary	Key Stage 2	7-11	ISCED 1
Secondary	Key Stage 3	11-14	ISCED 2
Secondary	Key Stage 4	14-16	ISCED 3

Source: Eurypedia (2016), “United Kingdom (Wales)”, Eurypedia website, <https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/fpfis/mwikis/eurydice/index.php/United-Kingdom-Wales:Overview>.

The Foundation Phase, introduced in 2010, combines early years education with the first two years of compulsory education (formerly known as Key Stage 1) and aims to produce a more developmental, experiential and play-based approach to teaching and learning (Welsh Government, 2015a). The Foundation Phase included all 3 to 7-year-olds for the first time in 2011/12 and initial evaluations have found that children are more likely to have higher levels of well-being and involvement in learning when they attend schools that make greater use of Foundation Phase pedagogies (Welsh Government, 2015b).

Welsh schools follow a curriculum established in 2008, which is now being revised. This revision follows an independent review of curriculum and assessment arrangements which has provided the background for developing a 21st century curriculum in Wales from the Foundation Phase to Key Stage 4 (ages 3 to 16) (Donaldson, 2015). The new curriculum will include literacy, numeracy and digital competencies as cross-curricular responsibilities, while covering a range of other areas of learning and experiences. Wales aims to have the new curriculum and assessment arrangements available to schools by 2018 and fully implemented for all 3 to 16-year-olds by 2021 (Welsh Government, 2016b).

Wales has a distinct cultural identity and is officially a bilingual nation. Education is delivered in Welsh-medium, English-medium and/or bilingual settings. Regardless of the medium of instruction all children in Wales are required to learn Welsh throughout the compulsory schooling period (Eurypedia, 2016). As of January 2016, about 33% of public primary schools and 24% of public secondary schools were Welsh-medium schools (Welsh Government, 2016c). The Welsh Government also offers an intensive Welsh language sabbatical for teachers, lecturers, instructors and classroom assistants who want to raise their standard of Welsh and gain confidence in using the language in their teaching practice.

Governance of the school system

Since the devolution settlement in 1999, Wales, like Scotland and Northern Ireland, has had responsibility for nearly all areas of education policy, except for teachers' pay and working conditions. The Welsh Government's Department for Education (DfE) is the highest level planner and policy maker (Tier 1) and is responsible for administering all levels of education, except for further and higher education. Although the overall responsibility for the Welsh school system lies in the hands of the DfE, the 22 local authorities in Wales are responsible for direct allocations to publicly funded schools and supporting vulnerable students. The local authorities work closely with the governing bodies of educational institutions and the four regional consortia, collectively considered "Tier 2".

The regional consortia, whose profiles vary (see Figure 1.2 and Table 1.2), were established in 2012 to help local authorities streamline their school improvement services and to reshape local school improvement functions. The Welsh Government established its National Model for Regional Working in 2014 that further clarified consortia's core responsibilities and services. These include challenge and support strategies to improve the teaching and learning in classrooms, collating from local authorities and schools the data on school and pupil performance and progress and using that data for improvements and; delivery of the national system for categorising schools (see Chapter 2) (Welsh Government, 2015c). The model has helped promote improvements in the quality of services provide to schools by the regional consortia and signalled a deeper commitment

to regional working. It emphasised a model of school improvement based on mutual support that was largely new across most of Wales. Schools, networks of schools and school communities (Tier 3) have an evolving role in the co-construction of education policy. These ground-level stakeholders are increasingly considered a primary resource for designing and delivering sustainable and innovative school improvement policies and practices.

Estyn, Her Majesty's Inspectorate for Education and Training in Wales, is responsible for inspecting the education system. This includes pre-school education, public and private schools, initial teacher training, further education institutions, local authorities, and the regional consortia. To assess the various actors and levels of the education system, Estyn uses different components of the Common Inspection Framework which will be updated in 2017 to align with the objectives of the new curriculum (Estyn, 2016f).

Qualifications Wales was established in 2015 as the independent regulator of Welsh qualifications. The body aims to ensure that the qualifications system meets the needs of learners and the economy effectively while promoting public confidence in Welsh qualifications. Currently, Qualifications Wales does not have awarding functions, but regulates non-degree qualifications, general qualifications such as General Certificates of Secondary Education (GCSEs) and Advanced Levels (A-Levels),³ and vocational qualifications. It has already introduced new GCSEs that emphasise the understanding of concepts and the ability to function in various types of situations – similar to how skills are assessed in PISA (Welsh Government, 2014). It also revised the new Welsh Baccalaureate and A-Level qualifications in 2015 (Qualifications Wales, 2015).

Table 1.2. Profiles of the four regional consortia in Wales

Regional profile indicators	Gwasanaeth Effeithiolrwydd (GwE), North Wales	Ein Rhanbarth ar Waith (ERW), South West and Mid Wales	Education Achievement Service (EAS), South East Wales	Central South Consortium (CSC), Central South Wales
Share of students in Wales	22%	28%	19%	31%
Number of public schools	439 public schools; 28% of all public schools	513 public schools; 32% of all public schools	245 public schools; 15% of all public schools	398 public schools; 25% of all public schools
Percentage of self-reported Welsh speakers aged 3+ (Welsh average 19 %)	31	24	10	11
Percentage of students eligible for free school meals (Welsh average 19 %)	16	17.5	20.8	20.7
Percentage of population that belong to an ethnic minority	2	4	4	7
Percentage of looked-after children in Wales	18	27	19	36

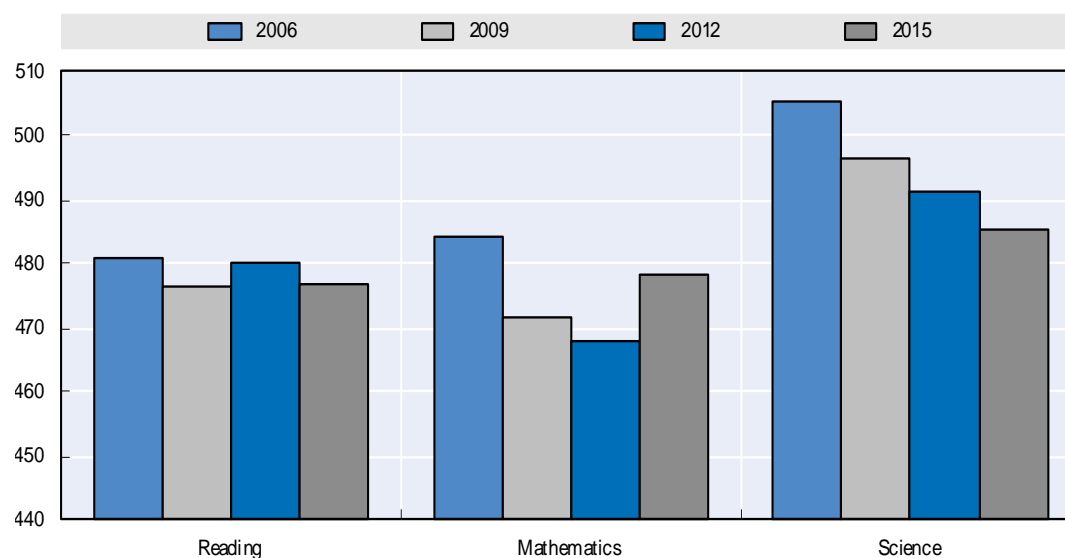
Sources: Estyn (2016a), *A Report on the Quality of the School Improvement Services Provided by the ERW Consortium*, www.estyn.gov.wales/sites/default/files/documents/ERW%20Eng.pdf; Estyn (2016b), *A Report on the Quality of the School Improvement Services Provided by the EAS Consortium*, www.estyn.gov.wales/sites/default/files/documents/EAS%20Consortium.pdf; Estyn (2016c), *A Report on the Quality of the School Improvement Services Provided by the Central South Consortium*, www.estyn.gov.wales/sites/default/files/documents/Central%20South%20Consortium_0.pdf; Estyn (2016d), *A Report on the Quality of the School Improvement Services Provided by the North Wales Consortium*, www.estyn.gov.wales/sites/default/files/documents/GwE_1.pdf.

Student performance

The PISA 2009 results have served as a catalyst of reform. They showed that the performance of Welsh 15-year-olds was significantly below the OECD average, in particular for reading and mathematics (see Figure 1.2). In PISA 2015, Welsh students also performed below the OECD average in the mathematics, reading and science tests. The mean performance in PISA 2015 in Wales was:

- 478 score points in mathematics, 10 points higher than the score in 2012 but still below the OECD average (490 score points). Wales performed below England (493), Northern Ireland (493) and Scotland (491), but higher than the United States and similar to Lithuania, Malta and Hungary.
- 477 score points in reading, significantly below the OECD average (493 score points), England (500), Northern Ireland (497) and Scotland (493) and similar to that of Luxembourg, Lithuania and Iceland.
- 485 score points in science, below the OECD average (493 score points), England (512), Northern Ireland (500) and Scotland (497), but similar to Latvia, Russia, Luxembourg and Italy, (OECD, 2016a).

Figure 1.2. PISA results for Wales, 2006-2015



Note: In 2015 changes were made to the test design, administration, and scaling of PISA. These changes add statistical uncertainty to trend comparisons that should be taken into account when comparing 2015 results to those from prior years. Please see the “Readers’ Guide” and Annex A5 of the PISA 2015 Initial Report (Volume I) (OECD, 2016b) for a detailed discussion of these changes.

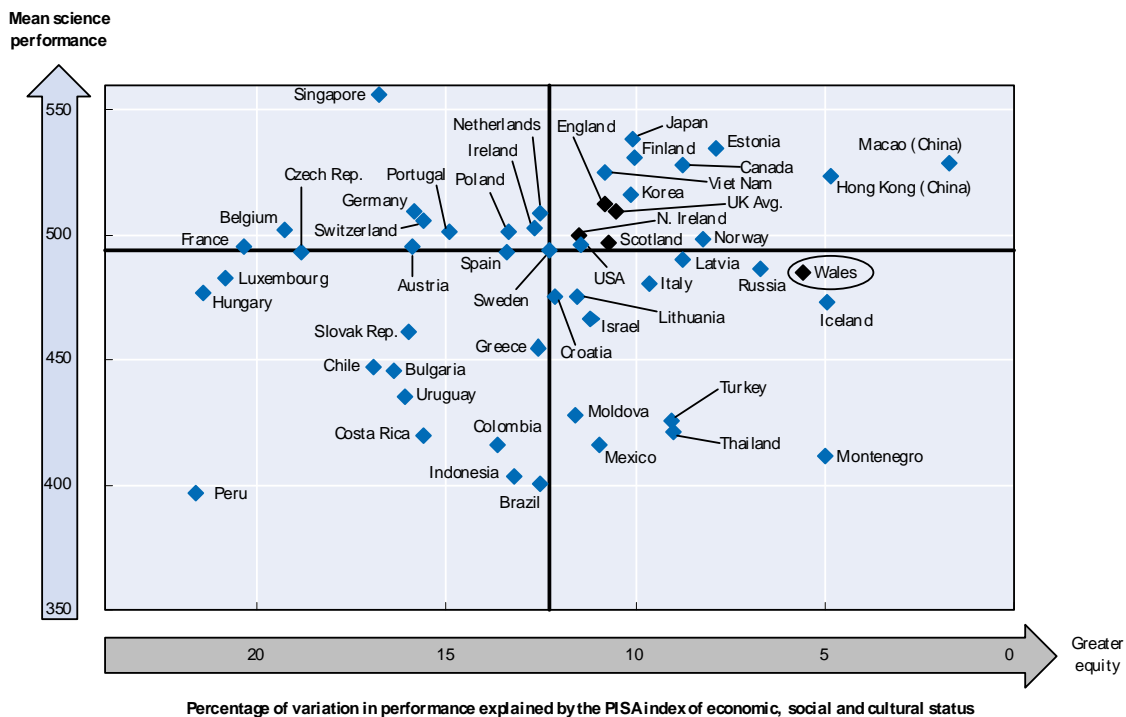
Sources: OECD (2016a), *PISA 2015 Results (Volume I): Excellence and Equity in Education*, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264266490-en>; OECD (2014b), *PISA 2012 Results: What Students Know and Can Do – Student Performance in Mathematics, Reading and Science (Volume I)*, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264208780-en>; OECD (2010), *PISA 2009 Results: What Students Know and Can Do (Volume I): Student Performance in Reading, Mathematics and Science*, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264091450-en>; OECD (2007), *PISA 2006: Science Competencies for Tomorrow's World: Volume 1: Analysis*, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264040014-en>.

National data show that results are slightly improving, although there are some comparability issues as several changes have been made in the way student performance

is measured at Key Stage 4. These changes are a result of a 2011 review of qualifications for 14 to 19-year-olds (Welsh Government, 2012). Reporting on school performance is based on the assessment results of students enrolled in Year 11 (aged 15). Data on children who are educated other than at school (EOTAS) are now included in overall performance figures and results for independent schools have been removed (Welsh Government, 2016c). This creates year-to-year comparability issues but the figures suggest that examination results are slightly on the rise. In 2015/16, 60.2% of students in Year 11 achieved the Level 2 threshold in each of the core subjects: English or Welsh language and mathematics; under the former system this translates to roughly 1.8 percentage points higher than the previous year.

According to the PISA 2015 results, a student's socio-economic background in Wales has less impact on their performance than for students in other parts of the United Kingdom. The difference in science scores between the most disadvantaged students and the most advantaged is only 52 points, whereas in England, Northern Ireland and Scotland this difference is at least 80 points (OECD, 2016a). Less than 6% of the variation in Welsh student performance in science is associated with socio-economic status, which is significantly lower than the OECD average (13%) and other UK countries (see Figure 1.3). While there are several system-level policies in Wales that favour equity, the country faces a number of equity challenges, including large performance variability within Welsh schools. In addition, many students are low performers and there are few high performers (see also Chapter 2). For the 2015 PISA mathematics assessment, for example, 23% of Welsh students did not achieve at least a Level 2 (similar to the OECD average) which is considered the baseline level of proficiency needed to fully participate in society.

Figure 1.3. Science performance and equity, PISA 2015



Source: OECD (2016a), *PISA 2015 Results (Volume I): Excellence and Equity in Education*, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264266490-en>.

School performance

Taking a step back and looking at the performance of Welsh schools as a whole, the evidence is mixed. The Estyn 2014/15 annual report shows that 75% of primary schools had good or excellent provision (Estyn, 2016e). This judgement is based on an assessment of students' learning experiences, teaching, support and the learning environment. Outcomes were more polarised at the secondary level: the share of excellent schools rose to 16%, higher than any year since 2010, but the share of unsatisfactory schools also increased (Estyn, 2016e, 2015). Overall, Estyn's 2014/15 annual report reveals that it judged less than half (40%) of the secondary schools it inspected to have good or excellent outcomes. The share of secondary schools judged to be good or excellent for their provision also decreased by 23 percentage points from 72% in 2013/14 to 49% in 2014/15 (Estyn, 2016e, 2015) although this trend data needs to be interpreted with some caution because of the small sample sizes. Estyn notes inconsistency in the quality of teaching or assessments as one of the main factors influencing the performance of secondary schools.

Overview of key findings of the 2014 OECD review

In 2013 the Welsh Government invited the OECD to undertake a review of the quality and equity of its school system which resulted in the report *Improving Schools in Wales: An OECD Perspective* (OECD, 2014a). The report identified a number of strengths and challenges (see Table 1.3) and provided a number of recommendations and policy options for further improvement with a longer-term perspective:

- ensuring that schools meet the learning needs of all their students
- building professional capital and collective responsibility throughout the system
- developing a coherent assessment and evaluation framework to promote improvement
- defining a long-term education strategy that builds on a limited number of core priorities, is adequately designed and resourced, and has appropriate governance and support structures.

A complete summary of these can be found in Annex C.

With this backdrop, this education rapid policy assessment looks into the range of reforms the Welsh Government have adopted to address the challenges identified in 2014. Since then, the OECD team has witnessed a shift in the Welsh approach to school improvement from a piecemeal and short-term policy orientation towards one that has a longer-term vision and is characterised by a move towards greater policy coherence and a process of co-construction with key stakeholders. The following chapter reviews the policies and implementation processes that underpin what we have termed the “Welsh education reform journey”. It provides an assessment and raises issues to consider to ensure the successful implementation of Wales's reforms and realise its vision for the Welsh learner.

Table 1.3. Strengths and challenges of the Welsh school system identified by the 2014 OECD review

Strengths	Challenges
Wales has a comprehensive school system that emphasises equity and inclusion. Student performance is less dependent on a student's school and socio-economic background than the OECD average.	With a high proportion of low performers, schools are not always able to respond to students' individual learning needs. Strategies for differentiated teaching and formative assessment are underdeveloped.
Welsh schools offer positive learning environments with good teacher-student relations and classrooms conducive to learning.	Recruitment, professional development and career progression policies for teachers, school leaders and support staff are underdeveloped.
Assessment and evaluation data are available at different levels of the system to improve policy and practice.	Assessment and evaluation arrangements lack coherence and Wales has struggled to strike a balance between accountability and improvement.
There is strong support among the teaching profession and general public for the policy directions set out under the current reforms.	The pace of reform has been high (reform fatigue) and lacks a long-term vision, an adequate school improvement infrastructure and a clear implementation strategy all stakeholders share.

Source: OECD (2014a), *Improving Schools in Wales: An OECD Perspective*, www.oecd.org/edu/Improving-schools-in-Wales.pdf.

Notes

1. A public school is referred to in Wales by the term “maintained school”.
2. The Special Educational Needs Code of Practice for Wales (Welsh Assembly Government, 2004) defines that children have special educational needs if they have a learning difficulty which calls for special educational provision to be made for them. Children have a learning difficulty if they: (a) have a significantly greater difficulty in learning than the majority of children of the same age; or (b) have a disability which prevents or hinders them from making use of educational facilities of a kind generally provided for children of the same age in schools within the area of the local education authority (c) are under compulsory school age and fall within the definition at (a) or (b) above or would so do if special educational provision was not made for them.
3. General Certificates of Secondary Education (GCSEs) are the main Level 1 and Level 2 general qualifications at age 14-19 in Wales. They are available in a wide range of subjects and are compulsory. A-Levels are the main general qualifications for Level 3 and are usually taken at age 16-19. They can be used as a basis for higher level study or training, or direct entry into employment (Qualifications Wales, 2015).

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Chapter 2.

An assessment of the Welsh education reform journey 2014-2017

The Welsh approach to education reform has included a wide range of policy changes and a shift in the implementation processes. Progress has been made in certain policy areas, including measures to support teacher quality, school-to-school collaborations and networks, school funding or school categorisation. Efforts have been guided through the development of Wales' vision of the Welsh learner, and a curriculum reform underway. To achieve success in its reform journey Wales should continue strengthening and bringing further coherence among the various reform initiatives: developing a high-quality teaching profession; making leadership a key driver of education reform; ensuring equity in learning opportunities and student well-being; and moving towards a new system of assessment, evaluation and accountability.

The Welsh approach to school improvement has also moved from a piecemeal and short-term policy orientation towards one that is guided by long-term vision and is characterised by a process of co-construction with key stakeholders. To achieve sustained impact however it is vital to strengthen several implementation processes: bringing further coherence across different policies; continuing the process of co-construction of policies; strengthening communication about the Welsh education reform journey; and enhancing the use of evidence, research and linking them to policy.

Introduction

In 2011, Wales embarked on a large-scale school improvement reform. This reform was a response to the disappointing PISA 2009 results which sparked a national debate on the quality and future of education in Wales and resulted in a broad consensus on the need for change. At the time of the 2014 OECD review, a wide range of policies and reforms were being implemented to improve student performance and reduce the impact of deprivation on learning outcomes as part of the overarching strategic 2012-15 plan, *Improving Schools* (Welsh Government, 2012b). The OECD review highlighted strengths and challenges, as well as recommendations for further improvement with a long-term perspective (see Chapter 1). Building on the 2014 OECD review and several other research reports, the Welsh Government's Department for Education developed and started to implement its new strategic plan for 2015-20, *Qualified for Life: An Education Improvement Plan for 2 to 19-Year-Olds in Wales* (Welsh Government, 2014a). This plan was being revised by the Welsh Government, at the time of drafting this report and the new version will be published in spring 2017.

Wales finds itself in the middle of a large-scale reform and as a natural result progress is variable. Results from PISA 2015 revealed mixed outcomes for Wales (OECD, 2016a). It is too early to judge the effectiveness of the Welsh Government's recent education reforms, and this is also not the aim of this report. This chapter takes stock of and assesses the reforms Wales has embarked on in recent years from a policy and implementation perspective. The first section focuses on the recent policies adopted in the Welsh reform journey since 2011. For each policy area, it provides an overview of the challenges Wales faces, the recent policy responses, and suggests any remaining issues and recommendations for Wales to consider. The second section assesses the implementation processes and enabling conditions underpinning the journey. It describes each policy area, and again suggests some remaining issues and recommendations. Both are intended to support Wales in the successful implementation of its reforms and realising its vision for the Welsh learner.

An assessment of the policies in the Welsh education reform journey

The Welsh approach to education reform has included a wide range of policy changes. Progress has been made in certain policy areas, including the various measures taken to support the professional learning of teachers, the increase in school-to-school collaborations and participation in networks, the rationalisation of school grants and the development of a national school categorisation system. These and other reform efforts have been guided through the development of Wales' vision of the Welsh learner, and a curriculum reform underway, which aims to introduce skills for the 21st century and develop all children and young people in Wales as:

- ambitious, capable learners, ready to learn throughout their lives
- enterprising, creative contributors, ready to play a full part in life and work
- ethical, informed citizens of Wales and the world
- healthy, confident individuals, ready to lead fulfilling lives as valued members of society (Donaldson, 2015).

However, a conclusion of the 2016 OECD team is that Wales should continue strengthening and bringing further coherence in the various ongoing reform initiatives

and use evidence to ensure effective implementation and that the vision and objectives are met. These are discussed below.

Developing a high-quality teaching profession

Although many factors outside of school can affect student achievement, the quality of teachers is the single best predictor of student learning and achievement within a school (Hattie, 2008; Hanushek and Rivkin, 2012). Despite positive school climates and good teacher-student relationships, PISA and other data sources have pointed to the need to improve the teaching in Welsh schools. This has become even more pertinent with the implementation of the new curriculum which has recently begun and will pose additional and new demands on teachers' skills.

The challenge for Wales

There are concerns about the quality of teaching in Welsh schools. At the Foundation Phase there appear to be relatively few challenges, but at the primary and secondary levels the data indicate more concerns (OECD, 2014; Estyn, 2016a). In 2015/16, Estyn found that teaching was good or excellent in 71% of primary schools, a 6 percentage point improvement since 2013/14 (Estyn, 2016a). The quality of teaching at the secondary level was good or excellent in only 39% of secondary schools, down from 50% of schools in 2013/14. Teaching was found to be unsatisfactory in 1% of primary schools and 9% of secondary schools. As various stakeholders who met with the 2016 OECD team also noted, there are still many teachers at all levels who lack the skills to implement quality formative assessments and use assessment data to support students in their learning. This makes it hard for them to adequately respond to students' individual learning needs.

In addition, data from PISA 2015 found that 15% of head teachers in Welsh secondary schools reported that a lack of well-qualified teachers was hindering their schools' capacity to provide instruction; this is below the level of England (22%) and the OECD average (20%), but nearly double that of Scotland and Northern Ireland (8% and 5% respectively) (OECD, 2016a). National data corroborate these findings and point to the need for providing stronger incentives for talented individuals to become teachers, especially in areas of shortages. In 2016 for example only 31% of registered school science teachers were trained in their subject area (Education Workforce Council, 2016a).

Furthermore, Wales has set out to develop a 21st century curriculum. The curriculum under development aims to significantly raise the bar in terms of what Wales expects of its teachers. In the future, Wales will need a different type of teaching professional; one who has significantly more responsibility, and one who understands the "why" and the "how" of teaching as well as the "what". These aspirations have major implications for both initial teacher education and for continuous professional learning (Furlong, 2015) and brings further impetus on strengthening leadership at all levels of the system to facilitate the desired changes and innovations in educational practice (see below).

Another important area where teachers' professionalism can be enhanced is their participation in collaborative learning and working within and across schools and through networking. These activities provide valuable opportunities for exchanging information and supporting the raising and/or maintaining high standards (OECD, 2016b). The 2014 OECD review however found that school-to-school collaboration in Wales was in its early stages of development, led from the top and under-resourced (OECD, 2014).

Recent reform initiatives

Selection, recruitment and preparation of new teachers

In recent years, Wales has implemented a number of reforms and policies to improve the selection, recruitment and preparation of new teachers. To raise the quality of candidates, the Welsh Government raised entry requirements to initial teacher education programmes in 2014/15 and has been limiting the number of places for new entrants since 2004/05 in an effort to better match the supply and demand for teachers (Welsh Government, 2016b). As a result, there was a 38% decrease in the number of first year initial teacher education enrolments between 2005/06 and 2014/15. However, the Welsh Department for Education (DfE) recognises that its systems for workforce planning are underdeveloped. It is working to improve these to better match the present and future supply and demand for teachers, support staff and school leaders in Wales.

In 2013 the Welsh Government introduced the Teach First programme, Teach First Cymru, to attract high-calibre students into the profession. However, an Estyn review of the programme found that most participants were teaching outside Wales after having completed the programme and achieving qualified teacher status (Estyn, 2016b). The report also noted that most participants preferred teaching positions in England and had moved out of Wales to advance in their leadership roles. These findings raise questions about the value of the programme for developing a high-quality, sustainable teaching profession for Wales.

Initial teacher education

Efforts to recruit high-quality individuals to the teaching profession must be matched with high-quality initial teacher education so that newly qualified teachers are well prepared to start their careers in the classroom. For several years there has been a consensus in Wales on the need to raise the quality and consistency of initial teacher education (Furlong, 2015; Tabberer, 2013), but progress has been slow. In response, the Welsh Government appointed Professor John Furlong (in March 2014) as Initial Teacher Education and Training Adviser for Wales to help raise standards within the sector. He was asked to identify the changes needed to bring about improvements to initial teacher education, following a review of the quality and consistency of teacher education undertaken by Professor Ralph Tabberer in 2013.

Furlong concluded in his resulting report, *Teaching Tomorrow's Teachers* (2015), that a number of changes are needed at three levels: the national, institutional and programme levels. Much of the responsibility for these changes lies with the universities both centrally and at their programme levels, as well as in schools, whose practices need to change. This provides further impetus for developing schools into learning organisations (see below). The role of government is to set up the appropriate structures that will encourage and support the changes needed to improve initial teacher education in Wales. Furlong made several recommendations to achieve this (see Box 2.1) which have all been adopted by the Welsh Government and are now being implemented.

One such example is the creation of the Teacher Education Accreditation Group, which is tasked with developing new accreditation requirements for higher education institutions offering initial teacher education programmes. The draft criteria for new accreditation underwent a consultation period with stakeholders from September to November 2016 (Welsh Government, 2016c). The government is currently reviewing

feedback on the draft and will release a final version establishing new requirements for programme accreditation. An important aspect of the draft criteria is their emphasis on partnership between higher education institutions and schools. This is essential for increasing the quality and relevance of initial teacher education, and for building professional capital within schools to develop themselves into learning organisations and move towards a self-improving school system.

Box 2.1. Agreed policy measures for improving the quality of initial teacher education in Wales

- That the Welsh Government, as a matter of priority revises the Standards for Newly Qualified Teachers.
- That the Welsh Government establishes a revised accreditation process for providers of initial teacher education.
- That the Welsh Government establishes a Teacher Education Accreditation Board within the Education Workforce Council for Wales.
- That the role of Estyn within initial teacher education be reviewed once a revised accreditation process is fully in place.
- That Estyn's Guidance for Inspection for schools be revised to include specific recognition of the contribution of a school to initial teacher education.
- That the Primary BA (Hons) qualified teaching status (QTS) in its current form be phased out and replaced by a four-year degree with 50% of students' time spent in main subject departments.
- That the Welsh Government monitors closely the impact of financial incentives on recruitment, particularly taking into account different funding levels in comparison with those available in England.
- That WISERD Education¹ be extended to include a pedagogical dimension linked to a network of five centres of pedagogical excellence across Wales.
- That the Welsh Government agrees to resolve future provision of initial teacher education through a process of competitive tendering with the Teacher Education Accreditation Board making the final decision as to how many universities should become accredited providers.

Source: Furlong, J. (2015), *Teaching Tomorrow's Teachers: Options for the Future of Initial Teacher Education in Wales*, <http://gov.wales/docs/dcells/publications/150309-teaching-tomorrows-teachers-final.pdf>.

Continuous professional learning across the career stages

The transformation of the teaching profession does not just involve high-quality recruitment and initial teacher education, it also requires those who are already teaching to adapt to constantly changing demands and continuously develop their skills (Schleicher, 2011). A number of reforms have been initiated in recent years to realise this objective, including the establishment of the Education Workforce Council in 2014 (Education Workforce Council, 2016a). The Council acts as an independent registration body for teachers in Wales and is responsible for safeguarding the interests of learners, parents and the public; and maintaining trust and confidence in the education workforce.

It plays an important role in several reform initiatives, like the development of the Professional Learning Passport (see below).

Furthermore, the government adopted a new approach to teacher professional development in 2014: the *New Deal for the Education Workforce*. This programme is aimed at offering all practitioners, support staff, teachers, leaders and further education lecturers in Wales entitlement to access world-class professional learning opportunities to develop their practice throughout their career (Welsh Government, 2015a). The Welsh Government is working closely with practitioners, the regional consortia, the Education Workforce Council, Estyn, and teaching unions to undertake an extensive review of current policies and programmes related to professional learning. This includes a review of professional standards for teachers and leaders which was underway at the time of the 2016 OECD team's visit to Wales. These new standards, presented in Box 2.2, are without a doubt a positive development. They reflect a contemporary, research-informed understanding of what good teaching entails, and they align with the government's ambitions for the new Welsh curriculum (Donaldson, 2015). Importantly, the standards have been developed "with" the profession and other key stakeholders as part of the Pioneer School Network (see below). This process of co-construction draws on stakeholders' expertise and helps ensure their ownership of the new standards. Once completed the standards should form the basis for appraisals and guide teachers in their continued professional development. The Welsh Government also aims to ensure that the revised standards guide the development of initial teacher education programmes. Higher education institutions will have to show how their teacher education programmes are relevant in relation to the revised standards as part of the accreditation process – this will be an important step towards raising the quality and relevance of initial teacher education in Wales.

Box 2.2. An overview of new professional teaching and leadership standards under development

In 2016, the Welsh Government initiated the development of new Professional Teaching and Leadership Standards. These will replace the current Qualified Teacher Standards (applicable at the end of ITE), the Practising Teacher Standards and the Leadership Standards.

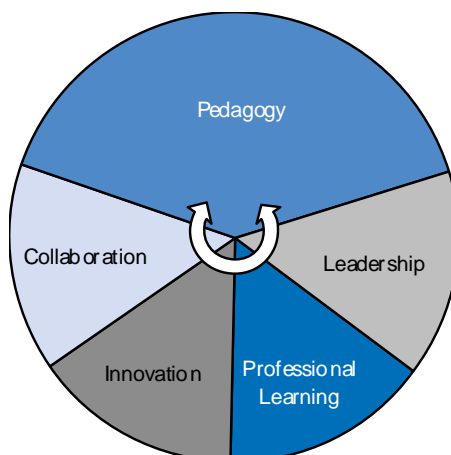
Central to the development of the new professional standards is a vision for teaching and leadership capacity that is based on professionalism: professionals who constantly strive to develop and grow; who take pride in their efforts and earn the respect of fellow professionals and the people they serve; and who take responsibility for their own development through professional learning and extend that responsibility to colleagues in a global network, always seeking better ways to achieve their goals in improving the life chances of children and young people.

DfE considers it essential that teachers and leaders feel a strong sense of personal and collective ownership for the new standards and this has been characterised by the inclusive way in which the standards have been developed. As such, the emerging model is a product of extensive engagement with the profession and other stakeholders such as Estyn, the Education Workforce Council, ITE institutions and workforce unions.

This engagement has generated a new model for professional standards based on five dimensions of professional practice (see figure below). These are common to teaching and leadership and are supported by overarching values and dispositions that focus on professional commitments to the central importance of literacy, numeracy and digital competence and the importance of promoting the Welsh language and culture.

Box 2.2. An overview of new professional teaching and leadership standards under development (*continued*)

The figure illustrates that the primary focus is on pedagogy – the five dimensions are inter-related and work as one to secure high-quality pedagogy. Together, they highlight the professional capacity that teachers and leaders will need to successfully meet and embrace the challenges of a new curriculum and enable them to thrive as professionals.



The inclusion of leadership reflects the belief that all teachers are leaders through the potential influence their own practice can have on the practice of others.

The draft descriptors are currently under development and will be the subject of a formal public consultation in due course. Additional leadership standards are being developed for those who choose to move into formal leadership roles up to and including headship. The same five dimensions and the focus on pedagogy will continue to apply but expressed to reflect the characteristics of different roles.

Source: Information provided by the Welsh Government.

Wales has also developed a number of tools to support teachers in their professional learning. For example, the Education Workforce Council introduced a Professional Learning Passport in 2015. This is a digital tool to help teachers in plan and record their professional learning (Education Workforce Council, 2016b). This level of self-guided learning and development is an important domain of teacher professionalisation (OECD, 2016b; Kools and Stoll, 2016). The government aims to incorporate the professional teaching standards into the Professional Learning Passport once they are completed. This will be an important step forward for guiding teachers' professional learning – and ensuring further policy coherence.

Wales stands out in the progress made in recent years in using information and communications technology (ICT) to facilitate communication, knowledge exchange and collaboration within and between schools and other parts of the system. For example, practitioners can access a searchable database of regional, national and international professional learning opportunities for science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM), ICT, and computing subjects and then track their learning in their Professional Learning Passport through the Learning Exchange platform, designed to support teachers in sharpening their subject expertise. Wales has also introduced the Hwb platform, a

dynamic digital learning tool that allows schools to share and access a range of resources supporting learning in Wales (Welsh Government, 2012a).

Another effort to support the continuous professional learning of teachers has been the funding of the master's in education practice programme for newly qualified teachers (since 2012). The programme is no longer accepting new students and is currently under review. The review will help inform the development of new master's programmes and master's-level professional learning opportunities. This evidence-based approach to policy making is to be applauded. Moving forward, Wales should consider not limiting participation in master's-level offers to newly qualified teachers, as was the case for the master's in educational practice programme. Instead, Wales could consider delaying newly qualified teacher's participation in such courses, recognising that in many cases new teachers will need (extra) time and adequate support to take on their new career responsibilities (Ingersoll and Strong, 2011; OECD, 2011, 2016c) and may find it difficult to combine them with further academic studies.

These are all important reform initiatives for promoting the learning of the teaching profession and Wales deserves recognition for making so much progress in developing and implementing these in a relatively short time frame. It should continue its efforts and in the process ensure it fulfils its stated intentions to increase the coherence between all the individual initiatives.

The review team also noticed a subtle but important shift in language in policy documents: while the term “professional development” continues to be used, the term “professional learning” seems increasingly common and was also frequently used by the stakeholders the team interviewed. It was explained to the 2016 OECD team that this term better captures the active involvement of education professionals in their own learning. As such, this seemingly small change in terminology in fact signifies an important step towards realising Wales' ambitions to develop a self-improving school system.

Promoting collaborative learning and working across the Welsh school system

Much progress has been made in recent years in promoting collaborative learning and working across the Welsh school system. The regional consortia have played a key role in this, but the government has also continued to promote school-to-school collaboration. One such recent example is the establishment of the Pioneer Schools Network in 2015. There are several sub-networks of Pioneer Schools, but these schools also meet regularly through national conferences, within schools and online (for example using the Hwb platform) to challenge and learn from one another in developing the new curriculum and supporting professional learning offers (Welsh Government, 2015b).

Though the increase in school-to-school collaborations and participation in networks and regional and national level events are to be applauded, the 2016 review team also found reasons for concern. The sheer volume of events organised by various stakeholders throughout the country every month brings with it the risk of diluting Wales's reform capacity. There is a need to further channel the enthusiasm for collaborative working and learning towards realising its education objectives. For example it is not clear how the recently announced establishment of a national network of excellence for science and technology relates to the development of the new curriculum and supporting professional learning offers. This may be partially a communication issue, but also suggests there is a need for greater coherence in reform efforts (see below).

Remaining issues and recommendations

- The Welsh Government should continue to strengthen its workforce planning and monitoring to better match the present and future supply and demand for teachers, support staff, and school and system leaders throughout Wales. This strategic effort could include more effective use of student teacher scholarships to respond to present and projected shortages of teachers in certain subjects.
- Continue moving forward with the recently initiated reform of initial teacher education that aims to increase the quality and relevance of the programmes to ultimately better prepare Wales's future teaching force for supporting students in their learning. The Welsh Government should carefully monitor the progress made and take further actions if found necessary. It should promote collaboration with teacher education institutions in other parts of the United Kingdom and beyond to supplement and/or raise initial teacher education capacity in Wales.
- The promotion of strong partnerships between initial teacher education institutions and schools through the accreditation process will be an important step towards improving the relevance of initial teacher education programmes, as can it offer schools with clear advantages in drawing on these institutions' expertise and capacity, bringing an external lens and supporting them in their development. Therefore similar incentives should be provided to schools to ensure they do their part in establishing and maintaining strong collaborations with initial teacher education institutions. Estyn inspections and school self-evaluation processes should be considered for this purpose.
- Continue developing a national approach to professional learning across all career stages, building capacity for the implementation of the new curriculum. This includes a strong focus on building teachers' formative assessment and differentiated teaching skills, which has been identified as a particular issue of concern, and will be essential for better responding to the learning and other needs of all Welsh students.
- One issue that has received relatively little policy attention is the induction of new teachers. Wales has long had a mandatory one-year induction period for all newly qualified teachers. This is important, as well-structured and well-resourced induction programmes can support new teachers in their transition to full teaching responsibilities (Schleicher, 2011). However, little is known about the quality of induction programmes in Wales. Although possibly not an issue for the short term, given its importance for retaining newly qualified staff and guiding them in their professional learning and development, the government should consider looking into the matter in a few years, after its current reforms are at advanced stages of implementation.
- Together with key stakeholders throughout the system, the Welsh Government should clarify its plans for enhancing teachers' professionalism and how this relates to other reforms, and ultimately for realising Wales' education objectives and vision. Some key stakeholders may need to exercise self-restraint over organising events, but this may not happen unless Wales clarifies its implementation plan and better communicates how reform initiatives fit together and what roles stakeholders have to play in Wales' larger reform journey. Wales should pay particular attention to "bringing on board" and supporting those schools that for various reasons are less likely to make use of the expanding professional learning available or participate in networks and other forms of collaborative learning and working while needing it most. This in turn calls for careful monitoring of schools' overall performance and progress.

Making leadership for learning a key driver of reform

Leadership is the essential ingredient that binds the separate parts of an education system together and is essential for achieving system-wide transformation. Leadership capacity doesn't just emerge, however; it needs to be built and requires modelling by leaders (OECD, 2014; Kools and Stoll, 2016). The Welsh Government has shown a clear intention to develop leadership across the education system but many national-level efforts to foster leadership seem to have either stalled or are still in the planning and design phase.

The challenge for Wales

As noted in the 2014 OECD review, leadership is unfortunately an afterthought in many reform efforts, rather than a key component of education improvement strategies (Hargreaves and Shirley, 2009). Successful reform depends on the capacity and co-operation of leaders at various levels of the system to translate the vision of an education strategy into action and put student learning at the centre of all their efforts. The importance of leadership capacity was prominently featured in Wales' *Improving Schools Plan* for 2012-2014 (Welsh Government, 2012b). In practice however, the OECD review found that leadership development – at all levels of the system – was weak, under-resourced and seemingly disconnected from the larger reform effort in Wales (OECD, 2014). Several reports in recent years (e.g. OECD, 2014; Hill, 2013; Estyn, 2016a) have highlighted concerns about the quality of leadership and management in a significant number of schools in Wales. The concerns raised in these reports included:

- lack of succession planning
- limited number of well-tailored professional development opportunities for senior and middle-level leaders, and teachers
- school leadership is not considered an attractive profession due to the high administrative burden
- Estyn inspections have identified only a small number of schools as having excellent practice in leadership and planning for improvement.

In 2014/15, Estyn found that 43% of secondary schools had good or excellent leadership and management and a majority had clear links between self-evaluation and improvement planning (Estyn, 2016a). Unfortunately, this also meant that leadership was at best adequate in nearly three out of five secondary schools and many school leaders did not effectively distribute responsibilities among staff. The situation is slightly better at the primary level with only three out of ten school leaders performing at best adequately. While Wales has introduced several leadership programmes in recent years through regional and local initiatives (see below), progress at the national level remains slow.

Furthermore, several stakeholders interviewed by the 2016 OECD team noted that school leaders, especially at the primary level, are often overburdened by administrative tasks. This distracts them from improving the quality of teaching and learning in their schools. Stakeholders noted that this unsatisfactory situation discourages teachers from pursuing headship positions and has contributed to recruitment challenges in parts of the country. Several schools and local authorities in Wales have responded to this situation by recruiting business managers or administrators to take over part of the administrative tasks school leaders. During the assessment visit, several stakeholders were positive about this development, noting it should be adopted further throughout the Welsh school system

as it allowed school leaders to focus on improving the teaching and learning in their schools.

Recent reform initiatives

In recent years, the Welsh Government has introduced some initiatives to develop leadership capacity across the system. For example, during the 2014 OECD review Wales was in the process of establishing the National Leadership Development Board. This advisory body was designed to provide direction to leadership development in Wales, initiate pilot projects for collaboration among head teachers, convene regional focus groups to discuss leadership needs, bring together newly appointed heads to share ideas and strategies, and establish a coherent Leadership Development Pathway to support and develop leaders at every stage of their career.

Furthermore, to facilitate better use of leadership standards, the Individual Leadership Review matrix was developed by the Welsh Government to help review (aspiring) leaders' practices against required standards and identify priority areas for further improvement (Welsh Government, 2016d). However, Estyn reports that most leaders do not use the leadership standards effectively or rigorously to help develop their leadership skills and behaviour and that as a result, only a few leaders challenge themselves or their colleagues effectively enough (Estyn, 2015b). While the Welsh Government has demonstrated a high level of ambition to develop leadership capacity, the 2016 OECD team found little evidence of successful implementation and realisation of the objectives that the National Leadership Development Board had set out to achieve.

In spite of this, or possibly because of it, the regional consortia and local authorities have taken up the challenge of developing leadership capacity. For example, the regional consortia have developed several leadership development programmes, and they are also acting as brokers for sharing best practices between schools. Regional consortia have also started networking among head teachers (with a support grant from the Welsh Government) to promote the mentoring of (new) head teachers (Welsh Government, 2016d; Estyn, 2015b). The initiatives taken by some municipalities and schools, for example in leadership succession planning, also deserve recognition. These bottom-up initiatives to develop Wales' present and future leaders are the hallmarks of a self-improving school system and are obviously a positive development considering the findings of the 2014 OECD review. However, they are also signs of a system that has not managed to provide sufficient strategic guidance and support for leadership development from the centre.

In recognition of the situation the Welsh Government has recently (2016) released plans for a new National Academy of Educational Leadership that aims to oversee the roll-out of support and development of a wider group of education leaders starting in September 2017. The academy will focus on leadership across education, including senior and middle leaders of education providers, local authority education staff, and Welsh Government education officials (Welsh Government, 2016e). It will initially focus on the needs of the next generation of head teachers, including:

- ensuring head teachers are well prepared for their role
- considering the structure of qualifications of head teachers, including the National Professional Qualification for Headship
- developing career routes for those who want to be head teachers and supporting new heads in their early years in that role

- working with well-established and successful head teachers to help create a group of leaders who can help promote best practice across schools (Welsh Government, 2016e).

The plans for the academy are a welcome development as the success of the ambitious curriculum reform and other reforms that Wales has embarked on depend on having sufficient numbers of capable leaders in schools and other levels of the system.

The Welsh Government has also started to review the provision of various school leadership development programmes in Wales. The 2016 OECD team agree that this is a precondition for ensuring that aspiring and current school leaders have access to a coherent suite of quality leadership development programmes. It is important Wales ensures that any leadership development initiatives, whether existing or new, form part of a coherent national-level leadership strategy – and sees through on its implementation.

Remaining issues and recommendations

- While recognising the work that has been done in recent years to develop Wales' present and future leaders in education, the review team's overarching conclusion is that much more needs to be done at the national level. Leadership development should – in policy and practice – become a prime driver of Wales' reform and a key component of a coherent strategy to improve the learning and other outcomes of all students. The plans for a National Academy of Educational Leadership provide an important and positive signal in this regard. Wales should ensure that its present and future leadership reform initiatives at various levels of the system – school, local authorities, regional consortia and central government – form part of a coherent national leadership strategy. This strategy should be pursued as the success of Wales' curriculum reform and other reform initiatives depend on strong leadership.
- Wales should speed up the development of leadership standards and professional learning available to (aspiring) leaders in order to give further guidance to and support school improvement efforts, particularly with the implementation of the new curriculum. It should furthermore ensure these standards align with the teaching standards and the model of the Welsh school as a learning organisation under development to ensure the coherence between policies and focusing all efforts on improving teaching and all students' development towards the vision of the Welsh learner.
- The Welsh Government and local authorities should promote the use of highly skilled business managers for schools, or groups of schools, to reduce the administrative burden on school leaders. This should allow leaders to focus more on educational leadership and developing their schools into learning organisations and in this way ensure the “readiness” of staff to deliver the new curriculum. The Welsh Government should monitor whether the use of business managers is indeed having the desired effect and take further action if needed.

Ensuring equity in learning opportunities and student well-being

A fair and inclusive system that makes the advantages of education available to all is one of the most powerful levers to help redress the effects of broader social and economic inequalities (OECD, 2012). The Welsh education system is based on equity guidelines, and has expressed a strong commitment to equity in education and student well-being. It has implemented various policies to realise these ambitions and with some noteworthy successes in recent years. However, several issues remain which call for further policy

attention as the country moves forward with plans for a new additional learning needs system.

The challenge for Wales

As mentioned, Wales is committed to supporting equity in its education system. Under the Education Act 2002, the national curriculum aims to be inclusive and ensure that all students receive an education regardless of their age, ability, aptitude and any special educational need. In the Improving Schools plan for 2012-15 and the Qualified for Life: An Education Improvement Plan that followed, the government set out the objective of reducing the impact of deprivation on educational outcomes. This is of great importance considering that in 2014/15 29% of Welsh children lived in relative poverty (Welsh Government, 2016f). Specific policies like the Pupil Deprivation Grant and free school meals (FSMs) target equity challenges in the school system.

PISA 2015 showed that although the impact of a student's socio-economic status on performance is lower than many OECD countries (see Figure 1.2), there still is large performance variability within Welsh schools (OECD, 2016a). Furthermore, 21% of students did not achieve Level 2 proficiency in the PISA reading and science assessments, the baseline at which students begin to demonstrate the competencies needed to actively participate in life. In mathematics, the figure was 23% although it is important to highlight that the share of low performers in mathematics has decreased by 6% since 2012. The 2016 *Wales Education Report Card* also showed that the attainment gap between students who receive FSMs and their peers who do not has narrowed (Welsh Government 2016g). Despite slow but consistent progress in recent years, considerable student performance differences remain. At Key Stage 3, for example, 77% of FSM students achieved the expected level (Level 5) in mathematics in 2016, compared to 93% among non-FSM students (Welsh Government, 2016h).

Furthermore, as noted by several stakeholders the 2016 OECD team interviewed, the system for supporting children and young people with additional learning needs is no longer fit for purpose. This system was introduced over 30 years ago and consists of two separate schemes: one for students with additional learning needs in schools and one for students in further education who have learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Additional learning needs are sometimes identified late and interventions are not systematically planned, nor implemented in a timely or effective manner (Welsh Government, 2016i). Only 12% of the 23% of students in Welsh public schools with additional learning needs had an official statement as of January 2016 (Welsh Government, 2016n). A statement describes a child's needs and the specialist help and provision required to meet those needs. A major challenge is that statements are often interpreted differently across local authorities; there are no nationally defined, clear criteria for giving statements (NAW, 2015).

Teachers, school leaders and support staff all have an important role to play in fulfilling the country's commitment to equity in education and student wellbeing. As noted above, however, many teachers struggle to adequately assess students' learning and other needs and differentiate their teaching accordingly. In addition there are concerns about the qualifications and standards of support staff, some of whom are directly responsible for supporting students with special education needs (Welsh Government, 2013b).

Furthermore, the 2014 OECD review found that Wales' school funding model included a great number of different grants for targeting equity challenges but failed to

provide schools with the stable funding to respond to students' special education needs in a sustainable way. Schools faced excessive bureaucracy, inefficiency and a lack of sustainability as a result of having to apply for the various grants and other funding mechanisms every year. The jobs of support staff in many schools depended on these annual grants and as a result some faced uncertain working conditions.

Wales' strong commitment to equity raises the question of whether it is desirable to give local authorities complete freedom to set their own criteria for allocating core budgets to schools. The Welsh Government provides funding for schools through the local government settlement. Local authorities each decide how much to spend on education, according to their own priorities and local circumstances, and then allocate budgets to individual schools. Currently there is little insight into how funds are actually spent at the school level. Some stakeholders noted that the differences in local funding models may have caused inequalities for both students and school staff across the 22 local authorities. For example, the salaries of teaching assistants, who in many schools fulfil an essential role supporting students with special education needs, vary depending on where they work because the local authority sets their pay. Their experience and responsibilities are not always recognised in the same way in the pay structure (UNISON, 2016).

Wales' school funding and governance model provides further challenges for the provision of services for students with special education needs. Various stakeholders noted that several local authorities, especially the smaller ones, lacked the capacity, both human and financial, to respond to the seemingly growing need for support for this diverse group of students. An additional complication is what one stakeholder called the "awkward" separation of responsibilities between local authorities, which manage the services for students with special education needs, and the regional consortia, which are responsible for school improvement services.

Recent reform initiatives

In recent years Wales has taken several steps to advance its equity agenda. This includes the adoption of the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act which came into force in April 2016 (Welsh Government, 2016j). The act includes seven Well-being Goals (see Table 2.1) which are aligned with the four purposes of the new Welsh curriculum (see below). The education sector will have an important role to play in achieving these wider national Well-being Goals.

In addition to the Well-being Goals, which include the promotion of a vibrant Welsh culture and thriving Welsh language, the Welsh Government set a target of nearly doubling the number of Welsh speakers, to reach 1 million by 2050. The education system is essential to achieving these ambitious goals but Welsh-medium and bilingual schools face several challenges. They often struggle to find staff confident in their ability to teach in the medium of Welsh and many of the teaching resources that exist in English are not available in Welsh (Estyn, 2014). The Welsh Government has taken a number of measures to address these challenges, including offering intensive Welsh-language sabbaticals to enable school staff to raise the standard of Welsh in their teaching practice. The Welsh Government is carefully monitoring whether these measures will suffice to realise its Welsh language and culture-related goals and objectives.

Table 2.1. Well-being goals for Wales, 2015

Goal	Description of the goal
A prosperous Wales	An innovative, productive and low-carbon society which recognises the limits of the global environment and therefore uses resources efficiently and proportionately (including acting on climate change); and which develops a skilled and well-educated population in an economy which generates wealth and provides employment opportunities, allowing people to take advantage of the wealth generated through securing decent work.
A resilient Wales	A nation which maintains and enhances a biodiverse natural environment with healthy functioning ecosystems that support social, economic and ecological resilience and the capacity to adapt to change (for example climate change).
A healthier Wales	A society in which people's physical and mental well-being is maximised and in which choices and behaviours that benefit future health are understood.
A more equal Wales	A society that enables people to fulfil their potential no matter what their background or circumstances (including their socio economic background and circumstances).
A Wales of cohesive communities	Attractive, viable, safe and well-connected communities.
A Wales of vibrant culture and thriving Welsh language	A society that promotes and protects culture, heritage and the Welsh language, and which encourages people to participate in the arts, and sports and recreation.
A globally responsible Wales	A nation which, when doing anything to improve the economic, social, environmental and cultural well-being of Wales, takes account of whether doing such a thing may make a positive contribution to global well-being.

Source: Welsh Government (2015c), *Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015: The Essentials*, <http://gov.wales/docs/dsjlg/publications/150623-guide-to-the-fg-act-en.pdf>.

Following elections to the National Assembly in May 2016, the Welsh Government published its five year programme for government in September 2016. The programme, *Taking Wales Forward 2016-2021*, builds upon the Well-being Goals by outlining priorities for areas of delivery, including an “Ambitious and Learning” Wales (Welsh Government, 2015c, 2016j). More concretely, the Welsh Government restated its commitment to provide the best start for young children, support looked-after children, raise standards in schools, develop the school workforce, promote digital competence, and enhance further and higher education opportunities.

Strengthening support for students with additional learning needs

Recognising that the system for supporting children and young people with special education needs is no longer fit for purpose, Wales is in the process of introducing new legislation to create a unified system for supporting all learners with “additional learning needs” (Welsh Government 2016i). This term replaces the term “special education needs” as a more positive and inclusive term focused on support for all learning needs, beyond the boundaries of formal education (Welsh Government, 2016i, 2016o). The new Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Bill aims to simplify the transitions between education settings for all students and learners with additional learning needs; it is taking a more transversal approach to multi-agency working so that students/learners, from the age of 0 to 25, are supported to overcome barriers to learning and achieve their full potential (Welsh Government, 2016i).

One key means to make this happen is the introduction of a single statutory system of individual development plans. These plans would be person-focused and follow children

if they change to a school under the responsibility of a different local authority. This is aimed at ensuring that their customised additional support is not interrupted. Wales has developed plans to implement and support the transition to the new additional learning needs system, including supporting the professional learning for teachers and support staff, and awareness-raising campaigns. If the Bill is accepted, the new structure for supporting students with additional learning needs could come into force by 2019.

Targeted funding to support disadvantaged schools and students

In 2015, the Welsh Government took an important step forward in simplifying and ensuring greater stability in funding for schools – a key recommendation of the 2014 OECD review and the Commission on Public Governance and Delivery (Welsh Government, 2014b) – by consolidating 11 different grants into a single Education Improvement Grant. Two other grants remain: the Pupil Deprivation Grant, for learners between the ages of 4/5 and 15, and the Early Years Pupil Deprivation Grant, which is extended to 3- and 4-year-olds. The Education Improvement Grant provides financial assistance to schools, local authorities and regional education consortia to improve educational outcomes for all learners (Welsh Government, 2016k). Under the terms and conditions of the grant, local authorities and their regional consortia are accountable for a series of outcomes and outcome measures to show how improvements are being delivered. Schools use their statutory School Development Plans to ensure the grant funding supports their individual school improvement journey as well as the local, regional and national priorities. Funding is distributed to regional education consortia in accordance with an agreed formula and funding methodology. As noted by several of the stakeholders interviewed by the 2016 OECD team, the consolidation of the 11 grants has not only reduced the administrative burden on schools and regional consortia by streamlining funding applications, it also allows schools to be more flexible in their budgeting and planning.

Enhancing working conditions and professionalisation of support staff

As of April 2016, school support staff in Wales are required to register with the Education Workforce Council, alongside teachers. This is intended to help build a more detailed picture of Wales' learning support staff, what they do and what qualifications they have. It is also aimed at offering essential assurances to learners, parents and the public about learning support staff's credentials, conduct and performance (Education Workforce Council, 2015). As had already been noted in the 2014 OECD review, the improvement of the working conditions, career structure and professionalisation of support staff is an area for further policy action for Wales.

Remaining issues and recommendations

- Wales should further review its school funding and governance model. Considering its strong commitment to equity and wellbeing, it should consider whether it is desirable to give local authorities complete freedom to set their own criteria for allocating core budgets to schools, while knowing little about how funds are actually spent. The government should consider moving towards a national needs-based school-funding formula, which is believed to be the most efficient, equitable and transparent method of funding schools (Levačić, 2006; Fazekas, 2012; OECD, 2014).

Remaining issues and recommendations (*continued*)

- Considering the country's commitment to equity and well-being, and the weaknesses of the current system, Wales should move forward with its plans for a new additional learning needs system. The government should ensure schools have adequate funding levels to be able to respond to the additional learning needs of all their students.
- In addition, Wales should consider expanding the mandate of the regional consortia to include responsibility for supporting students with additional learning needs. This would allow them to benefit from economies of scale and to invest in a strong workforce, with a range of specialities, to respond to the diverse learning and other needs of students.
- Considering their numbers and important role in supporting students in their learning, the Welsh Government should introduce minimum qualifications for all support staff, prioritising teaching and learning assistants to ensure a common standard of quality throughout Wales. The existing Higher Level Teaching Assistants Standards have not yet led to standards for the other support staff who work in classrooms (Welsh Government, 2016). In addition, to attract and retain motivated and talented individuals, the Welsh Government should improve the working conditions for those support staff working directly with students and who can have a positive impact on learning. It should consider introducing nationally determined salary scales.

Moving towards a new, coherent system of assessment, evaluation and accountability arrangements

Governments and education policy makers in OECD countries are increasingly focused on the assessment and evaluation of students, teachers, school leaders, schools and education systems (OECD, 2013b), and Wales is no exception. In the last decade it has undergone considerable changes to its assessment and accountability arrangements. However, these have become heavily influenced by demands for accountability and it is commonly accepted that there is a need for rigorous reform (Donaldson, 2015).

The challenge for Wales

Due to changes in assessment and accountability arrangements, Wales has rich data sets available to inform the school improvement efforts of government, school leaders, teachers, local authorities, regional consortia and other stakeholders. However, a key finding of the OECD 2014 review was that assessment and evaluation arrangements lacked synergies and needed to be better aligned to education priorities. Furthermore, formative assessments and evaluations had become overshadowed by higher-stakes assessments and greater public accountability, and had become over elaborate, with several duplications (OECD, 2014; Donaldson, 2015; Hill, 2013).

For example, in 2008 teacher assessments were introduced to assess student performance at the end of the Foundation Phase and Key Stages 2 and 3. These assessments have since become part of the annual national data collection cycle that monitors the education system as a whole. Annual Statutory National Reading and Numeracy Tests for students in Year 2 through Year 9 were introduced five years later (in 2013), partly as a response to concerns about the capacity of teachers to deliver quality assessments of their students' work. While the National Reading and Numeracy tests are designed as diagnostic tools, they are not always perceived this way at the school level

and some teachers still struggle to make adequate use of formative assessments. The Welsh Government has acknowledged that formative assessments or “assessments for learning” are not well embedded in teaching practices (Welsh Government, 2014a). At both primary and secondary levels, Estyn identified shortcomings and inconsistencies in the way some teachers set targets and offered guidance to students on how to improve: only half of secondary schools were found to have teachers who provided useful feedback to students (Estyn, 2016a).

At the time of the 2014 OECD review, external school evaluations in Wales were over-elaborated and subject to duplication. In addition to official Estyn school inspections, the Welsh Government introduced the “school banding” initiative in 2011. The school banding system grouped – or banded – schools together according to a range of indicators such as attendance rates, GCSE results, relative improvement and the proportion of students on free school meals (Welsh Government, 2013a). While this was intended to increase accountability and target resources onto low-performing schools, there were a number of unintended consequences, such as the perceived unfairness of the analysis process and the ranking of schools which led to inter-school competitiveness which tainted public trust. Collaboration among schools also suffered due to the high level of competition, which was at odds with Wales’ ambition to develop a collaborative professional learning culture across a self-improving school system.

In many Welsh schools, effective teacher and leadership appraisals were underdeveloped in 2014 (OECD, 2014). Part of the challenge lay in the 55 professional standards for teachers and 66 leadership standards, which in many cases lacked useful descriptors. This large number of static standards has made it hard to identify professional learning priorities and link them to a school improvement agenda. The underlying challenge was the absence of any clear vision of the Welsh teacher and leader, and of the career advancement and professional learning opportunities available to them (OECD, 2014).

These and other challenges to the country’s assessment and evaluation arrangements led to a consensus that Wales should develop a coherent framework for assessment and evaluation to promote improvement across all levels of the school system including student assessment, professional appraisal, and school and system-level evaluation (Welsh Government, 2014c; Donaldson, 2015). Wales has taken several steps towards realising this objective and currently finds itself in transition between the old system and the new. The exact parameters for assessment, evaluation and accountability are still to be defined. Several of the stakeholders the 2016 OECD team met indicated they felt uncomfortable with this situation, partly as it was unclear how or when changes to the existing arrangements would be made.

Recent reform initiatives

An important step towards improving assessment, evaluation and accountability arrangements in Wales was the review of the curriculum and assessment arrangements by Professor Donaldson. The resulting report, *Successful Futures* (Donaldson, 2015), includes 68 recommendations which were accepted in full by the Welsh Government in June 2015. Following this report, the Welsh Government released a policy document, *Qualified for Life: A Curriculum for Wales – A Curriculum for Life* (Welsh Government, 2015d), which set out in broad terms the steps needed to implement the recommendations of the *Successful Futures* report.

Wales has started implementing these recommendations. For example, it established the proposed network of Pioneer Schools in November 2015. These Pioneer Schools are playing a pivotal role in leading and shaping the detailed design of the new curriculum and students assessments. Good progress has been made with the development of the Digital Competence Framework (released in September 2016) and currently Pioneer Schools are working with the support of leading (international) experts to develop the other parts of the curriculum and future assessment arrangements, and the supporting professional learning offers (Welsh Government, 2016a). The Welsh Government is also updating assessment arrangements by developing a system of adaptive tests to better support students in their learning. These adaptive student assessments are scheduled to be made available online in May 2018 and are expected to be valuable resources for strengthening the teaching and learning in Welsh schools.

A positive development towards strengthening teacher and leadership appraisals has been the development of new teacher standards (Box 2.2). These standards are currently under development, and will be subject to public consultation in spring 2017. The Welsh Government should consider speeding up the development of leadership standards for (aspiring) leaders. These standards should be aligned with teaching standards and the Welsh school as a learning organisation model, which is under development, in order to give further guidance to and support school improvement efforts.

Another positive development has been the replacement of the school banding system with the national school categorisation system in 2014. Developed collectively by the regional consortia and the Welsh Government, the new system identifies schools most in need of support over a three-year period (compared to the one-year period under the school banding system), using a three-step colour coding strategy. Step 1 assesses publicly available school performance data and Step 2 the school's own self-evaluation in respect to leadership, learning and teaching. Challenge advisers from the regional consortia examine how the school's self-evaluation corresponds to the performance data under Step 1 (Welsh Government, 2016m). This is intended to ensure the process is robust. Under Step 3, judgements reached under the first two steps lead to an overall judgement and a corresponding categorisation of each school into one of four colours: green, yellow, amber and red. Categorisation then triggers a tailored programme of support, challenge and intervention agreed by the local authority and the regional consortia.

Although considered an improvement by many, the national school categorisation system is still perceived by some as a high-stakes exercise and may stigmatise professionals and schools working in the most challenging communities (BBC, 2015). Several stakeholders interviewed by the 2016 OECD team criticised the calculation method based on the school performance data (Step 1), in particular the relative weight given to the number of students receiving free school meals in the final judgement. The Welsh Government has acknowledged the need to further refine the school categorisation system (Welsh Government, 2015d).

Further, during the drafting of this OECD assessment, Estyn was in the process of shaping and piloting its new inspection framework. The revised framework is scheduled to be fully implemented in September 2017 and will focus on the following inspection areas: 1) standards; 2) well-being and attitudes to learning; 3) teaching and learning experiences; 4) care, support and guidance; and 5) leadership (Estyn, 2016c). As part of this new framework, Estyn plans to move away from overall judgements in favour of paragraphs summarising findings that focus on actions to support improvement – a

positive development that fits well with the directions set out for the new curriculum. The cycle of Estyn inspections will also be extended to seven years to allow schools enough time to implement changes, while following up with low-performing schools to monitor improvements more closely.

Another important development is Estyn's commitment and flexibility towards the curriculum reform process. From the beginning, inspectors have been involved in the Pioneer Schools Network, attending events and liaising with Welsh Government, regional consortia and staff from the schools. The made public statements that Pioneer Schools won't be "penalised" for trying something new or different – and in fact are encouraged to do so – are essential for creating the culture of trust and space needed for creativity and innovation to thrive. The Welsh Government, Estyn, regional consortia and local authorities should ensure all education staff across the country are aware of this.

Important steps towards the development of a coherent assessment and evaluation framework have been made, but it will not be finalised before September 2018. Several of the stakeholders the OECD interviewed indicated they felt uncomfortable about waiting that long and were uncertain whether to initiate changes and innovations, partly because of fear of punishment or other negative consequences. They called for greater clarity on the emerging assessment and evaluation arrangements – while appreciating that a full insight into the framework cannot be provided immediately.

Remaining issues and recommendations

- Although good progress has been made towards developing some assessment and evaluation arrangements in several areas, implementing all the recommendations of the Successful Futures report and developing a coherent assessment and evaluation framework will take time. Wales finds itself in transition between its old system of assessment, evaluation and accountability arrangements and its new one, whose exact parameters are still to be defined. Several of the stakeholders the OECD interviewed indicated they felt uncomfortable waiting for the full presentation of the national assessment and evaluation framework in September 2018. In order to maintain the broadly shared support for the reform of the curriculum and assessment arrangements, to give people the confidence to change and innovate, and to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of policies and Wales's overall reform journey the Welsh Government should give further clarity on the emerging assessment and evaluation framework. It should also communicate which steps have already been taken and which are to follow, with clear milestones, up to the launch of new national assessment and evaluation framework.
- As noted above, Wales should continue developing a national approach to professional learning across all career stages that builds capacity for the implementation of the new curriculum. This includes a strong focus on building teachers' formative assessment and differentiated teaching skills as these will be vital for the successful implementation of the new curriculum and ultimately improvements in teaching and learning in Wales' classrooms.
- For the same reason Wales should continue improving the skills of school leaders to use data to inform their school improvement efforts. This includes developing their capacity to appraise school staff, including providing effective feedback and coaching to support their professional learning, and feed this in to the school improvement planning process. This will be particularly important as the implementation of the new 21st century curriculum will call for assessments of and discussions on the skills and learning needs of teachers.

Remaining issues and recommendations (*continued*)

- Despite the positive characteristics of the school categorisation system and the new inspection framework under development, there still seems to be scope to bring greater coherence and synergy between the two. A common framework for external and self-evaluations would provide a more consistent point of reference for school improvement. To ensure greater policy coherence and to focus efforts on improving teaching and students' development towards the vision of the Welsh learner, these systems should also be used to promote important policy objectives such as partnerships between schools and initial teacher education institutions (Furlong, 2015), collaborative working and learning between schools, and the related ongoing development of the model of the Welsh school as a learning organisation.
- In line with the ambitions set out for the new curriculum and assessment arrangements (Donaldson, 2015; Welsh Government, 2015d) and as suggested by several stakeholders Wales should consider making school self-evaluations more prominent in the school categorisation system, possibly by removing the complicated calculation method for school performance data (Step 1) altogether, which some consider to be unfair. Also as further noted by stakeholders removing the public reporting of colour categorisations may help reduce stigmatisation and focus all attention and efforts on bringing about the desired changes and innovation in teaching and learning.
- To learn from the good and/or innovative practices in schools (for example in student assessments and the implementation of the digital curriculum framework) Wales should consider establishing a national approach to identifying good practice, driven by school self-evaluations. Good practices should be evaluated, celebrated and disseminated across the country, through various means (such as public events, websites and newsletters).

Ensuring the effective implementation of reforms

Having analysed Wales' policies in the previous section, this section looks into the reform process itself, to ensure their effective implementation. Recognising that the implementation of reforms is often far from a linear process, a key finding of the 2016 OECD team is that the Welsh approach to school improvement has moved from a piecemeal and short-term policy orientation towards one that is guided by long-term vision and is characterised by a process of co-construction with key stakeholders. However, Wales risks reverting to a piecemeal approach, with different actors going their own way. It is therefore vital to strengthen several implementation processes. These include: bringing further coherence across different policies; continuing the process of co-construction of policies with key stakeholders; strengthening communication about the Welsh education reform journey; and further enhancing the use of evidence, research and linking them to policy.

Implementation challenges for Wales

In 2011, Wales embarked on a large-scale school improvement reform. By 2014 it was implementing a wide range of policies to improve student performance and reduce the impact of deprivation on learning outcomes as part of the overarching strategic plan, *Improving Schools* (Welsh Government, 2012b). However, Wales lacked a shared vision of the Welsh learner to guide the country in its school improvement efforts (OECD, 2014). In addition, some schools were facing challenges in implementing the different reform initiatives, particularly because there were so many of them. Head teachers and

other stakeholders reported that the sheer number and often short time spans for schools to implement these reforms brought with them a risk of only partial implementation, or “reform fatigue”. Part of the challenge was that the profession did not seem to be sufficiently engaged in the policy-making and implementation process. Reform initiatives also lacked coherence, and there was a need for an adequately resourced implementation plan. Furthermore, there was scope for more strategic use of monitoring and research evidence to inform policy making and implementation.

At the same time, school improvement services were found to require fundamental reform (Hill, 2013; OECD, 2014). The decision to divide school improvement functions among 22 local authorities appeared to have spread educational expertise too thinly to have impact. In response to this situation, the Welsh Government had set up four regional consortia in late 2012 to strengthen the support to schools. During the 2014 OECD review, regional consortia had not yet achieved this objective and lacked consistency in the quality of their school improvement services.

Since then, the Welsh Government, with the support of key stakeholders, has aimed to address many of these issues and with some noteworthy successes. However, if the synergies of the various actors are not well aligned and supported, then there is a risk of reverting to a piecemeal approach. It is therefore vital for Wales to strengthen several of its implementation processes.

Bringing further coherence between different reform initiatives

Wales defined an overall vision for its education system in *Qualified for Life: An Education Improvement Plan* (2015-20). Its vision states that “learners in Wales will enjoy teaching and learning that inspires them to succeed, in an education community that works cooperatively and aspires to be great, where the potential of every child and young person is actively developed” (Welsh Government, 2014a). To achieve this vision, it outlined four strategic objectives:

- an excellent professional workforce with strong pedagogy based on an understanding of what works
- a curriculum which is engaging and attractive to children and young people and which develops within them an independent ability to apply knowledge and skills
- the qualifications young people achieve are nationally and internationally respected and act as a credible passport to their future learning and employment
- leaders of education at every level working together in a self-improving system, providing mutual support and challenge to raise standards in all schools.

In 2015 Wales further refined its education vision of the Welsh learner through the four purposes of the new curriculum. These state that all children and young people should develop as:

- ambitious, capable learners, ready to learn throughout their lives
- enterprising, creative contributors, ready to play a full part in life and work
- ethical, informed citizens of Wales and the world
- healthy, confident individuals, ready to lead fulfilling lives as valued members of society (Donaldson, 2015; Welsh Government, 2015d).

These four strategic objectives and four purposes provide an important framework to guide ongoing and future reforms and school improvement efforts. However the realisation of these objectives and the ultimate goal, i.e. realising its vision of the Welsh learner as defined in the four purposes, could still be clarified. Many stakeholders the OECD team met mentioned the four purposes as the guiding vision for their work, although some were less clear about Wales' vision and objectives and instead referred to lower-order objectives or specific activities. Even among those who were clear about Wales' vision and objectives, some were unclear about how these would be achieved or their roles in it. For example, one of the objectives of the Qualified for Life plan, a self-improving school system, permeates changes at each tier of the system, but is a concept that in itself needs to be clearly defined. Another example is the announcement of the establishment of a national network of excellence for science and technology, mentioned in the previous section. It is not clear how this relates to the development of the new curriculum and supporting learning offers.

To bring greater coherence, Wales needs to sharpen the narrative and identify how its various reform initiatives align to the vision and the four purposes. Indeed, the 2016 OECD team found strong awareness among stakeholders on the need to ensure greater coherence between the different reform initiatives. Although progress has been made in recent years, reform initiatives need greater coherence, such as linking teacher standards to initial teacher education programmes, or further strengthening synergies between the national categorisation system and education inspections (discussed above). The Welsh Government and other stakeholders seem well aware of these issues and have demonstrated their commitment to resolving them. The revision of the Qualified for Life plan and the recently established Change Board are important means for ensuring greater policy coherence. The Change Board is made up of representatives of government, regional consortia, Estyn, the Education Workforce Council and others key stakeholders. It meets every six weeks and is responsible for the successful delivery of the curriculum reform and the supporting reforms of initial teacher education and work force development, and for providing strategic direction and ensuring coherence across the whole.

Schools and higher education institutions, local authorities, regional consortia, and government all need to understand specifically how and when they are expected to contribute to realising the country's vision of the Welsh learner. However, their roles and expected contributions will not be constant and should evolve as Wales advances in its reform journey.

Co-construction of policies with key stakeholders

In recent years, Wales has increasingly adopted a process of co-construction of policies between the Welsh Government and key stakeholders. This represents a shift in governance from what the OECD witnessed in 2014: at that time, while there was general support for the overall direction of reforms, policy making was largely a top-down process. The 2016 OECD visit found that the Welsh Government has been aiming to include a variety of stakeholders in the development and implementation of policy responses, including teachers, school leaders, regional consortia and many others, as their involvement is considered crucial to the successful implementation of reforms. The development and implementation of the new curriculum that involves and counts on the active support from schools, local authorities, regional consortia, Estyn, higher education institutions and others, is an example. The mentioned Change Board is another such example.

This process of co-construction reflects a broader international trend of “open government” that aims to better interpret and respond to citizens’ demands and to restore their trust in public institutions by engaging them in the process (OECD, 2016d). While co-construction of policy requires a significant investment of time and effort in the immediate term, it also fosters greater collaboration and trust among stakeholders in addition to support for the reforms in the longer term. Several stakeholders noted that it has helped lay the foundations for moving towards realising Wales’ ambitions for a self-improving school system. However as also noted by several stakeholders during the OECD assessment visit, there is scope to further consolidate the co-construction process, and clarify the roles and responsibilities of the various actors. This includes making explicit how teachers, school leaders and other stakeholders are part of a self-improving school system and are expected to contribute to realising the vision of the Welsh learner.

Continue strengthening Wales’ school improvement infrastructure

A good education strategy cannot lead to success without effective implementation. Any improvement strategy requires thinking about the kind of structures that may be needed to support its implementation; this sounds obvious but has often been overlooked in education reforms (Levin, 2012; Spillane, in OECD, 2013a). An overarching conclusion of the 2014 review was that the Welsh Government, local authorities, regional consortia and others were making considerable efforts to support schools, but clarity on what type of support was to be provided and by who was lacking (OECD, 2014). Several years on, this situation has improved significantly due to concrete policy measures and the commitment of people at various levels of the system to work together to implement them.

An important step forward in clarifying the roles and responsibilities of schools, local authorities, regional consortia and the Welsh Government came with the adoption of the national model for regional working in 2014. This model outlines the vision of regional consortia as well as the respective roles of each tier of the education system. The national model covers the following elements in five key components: 1) the mission, values and principles of effective school improvement; 2) the scope of regional consortia; 3) the delivery of respective regional consortia and local authority functions; 4) governance and accountability; and 5) the organisation and operation of consortia (Welsh Government, 2015e).

The national model also introduced the role of challenge advisers, who superseded the role of system leaders and who are to act as agents of change, supporting and challenging school leaders to improve performance and brokering support that has a positive impact on learners. The various stakeholders the 2016 OECD team interviewed were in general positive about the contributions these challenge advisers are making. According to Estyn and the Wales Audit Office, who jointly conducted a review on the functioning of regional consortia in 2015, most head teachers and chairs of governing bodies report that the challenge advisers scrutinise the performance of their schools closely and fairly (Estyn, 2015a). However, they also identified several areas where the functioning of challenge advisers, and regional consortia more generally, could be further improved. For example, support in several areas of learning, such as non-core subjects, is weak, inconsistent or unavailable, and two regional consortia do not provide enough support to Welsh-medium schools. The regional consortia recognise the report’s findings and are working to improve their services.

Various stakeholders also expressed the need for challenge advisers to receive more training to enhance their ability to support the implementation the new curriculum and assessment and evaluation arrangements. It is therefore a positive development that the regional consortia are involved in the curriculum reform, including through their participation in the Pioneer School Network. This involvement is an important step towards identifying what the new professional learning needs will be within schools and considering what these entail for the capacity of their own organisations.

Furthermore, at the time of the OECD visit the Welsh Government and regional consortia reached an agreement to move forward with a multi-year funding model for regional consortia. This change in funding model is among others aimed to allow for multi-year planning and as such more strategic investments in the capacity of both consortia and schools. It also importantly illustrates the confidence the Welsh Government has in the capacity of the regional consortia to deliver school improvement services.

Another positive development is the strengthening of the co-ordination and collaboration between the four consortia since the second half of 2016. The consortia representatives interviewed by the 2016 OECD team were very positive about this recent development and noted it has opened up opportunities for peer learning between the consortia and raising the quality of and/or rationalisation of services provided to schools. As one of the consortia representatives noted, for a small country such as Wales with a tight public budget, it would be a waste of human and financial resources to continue doing otherwise.

Further enhancing the use of evidence and research and its link to policy

One of the recommendations of the 2014 OECD review was to strengthen the link between evidence, research and policy. Wales has taken important steps forward on this issue. These include a more strategic use of research by the Welsh Government to inform its policy decisions, including the monitoring and evaluation of many of its policies and programmes. The new teacher standards under development are a good example of how Wales is making good use of the latest research evidence of what entails good teaching. The developmental work of the Pioneer Schools Network, which is monitored and supported through action research, is another. The regional consortia have also started to study the effectiveness of their school improvement services, often engaging one of Wales' higher education institutions. These are important measures to strengthen the evidence base of “what works” in Wales. Wales should continue to invest in building its research and assessment capacity at all levels of the system. This will be essential for the successful implementation of its curriculum reform.

Furthermore, Estyn regularly publishes case studies of “sector-leading” practices it has identified during its inspections. These case studies are written by schools and other providers and explain how they have excelled in a specific area of education or training. In addition, its thematic reports contain good examples of how different providers have successfully tackled various challenges within education. These are important studies that should continue to focus on supporting the various reforms Wales has embarked on.

To complement this research work, Wales should as mentioned in the previous section consider establishing a national approach for the identification of good practices that is driven by school self-evaluations.

Ensuring adequate funding for effective implementation

One of the policy recommendations in the OECD 2014 review was to ensure that the education strategy included an adequately resourced implementation plan to deliver Wales' education objectives. The 2016 OECD team was informed that the updated *Qualified for Life: Education Improvement Plan* will outline three specific delivery plans, including the use of targeted resources for realising Wales' education vision. The Welsh Government has committed an additional GBP 100 million to raise school standards over the next five years which will support the realisation of the objectives of the updated plan. The majority of funding has been earmarked for improving teaching and learning, supporting the development of a self-improving system and building capacity in educational leadership. Whether this additional investment will be enough to support the realisation of the strategic objectives is impossible to tell at this stage and goes beyond the scope of this report. However, at the very least it gives further evidence of Wales' commitment towards realising its education objectives and ultimately its education vision for all Welsh learners.

Improving communication about the Welsh education reform journey

The OECD team recognised that there is scope for better communication both with those involved and the public about the realisation of Wales' education objectives and the ultimate goal of realising its vision of the Welsh learner. People at various levels of the system and beyond need to understand how the various reform initiatives relate to one another and contribute to realising the vision. Clarity on the roles of stakeholders is also essential. The Welsh Government should therefore seek to communicate on these issues through an easy-to-understand narrative on the Welsh education reform journey.

The OECD team further found that there has been little celebration of achievements to date, even though good progress has been made in certain areas in recent years, such as the development of the Digital Competence Framework. The Welsh Government should therefore consider defining clear milestones with key stakeholders, and communicate and celebrate their achievement to maintain the enthusiasm for the reform journey.

Remaining issues and recommendations

- Recognising the progress made in recent years, the OECD team formed the opinion that Wales needs to bring further coherence in and clarify the connections between different reform initiatives. This includes, together with key stakeholders, clarifying how the different reforms and policies relate and contribute to realising the shared vision of the Welsh learner, resulting in a coherent and adequately resourced implementation plan. The revision of the Qualified for Life plan and the recently established Change Board are important means for doing so. Particular attention should be paid to clarifying how the recently announced national network of excellence for science and technology relates to the development of the new curriculum and supporting learning offers, and to align it to the broader reform agenda. This should be an integrated part of the Pioneer School network.

Furthermore, the implementation plan should pay attention to supporting those schools which, for various reasons, are less likely to engage in reform initiatives or make use of the expanding professional learning offer or participate in networks and other forms collaborative learning and working.

The implementation plan should also not be seen as fixed; it should evolve as Wales' advances on its reform journey. This calls for regular reviews, while stakeholders at all levels of the system will need to be open to changes to their respective roles. The role of the Change Board could be essential to this process.

- The Welsh Government needs to continue the process of co-constructing policies with key stakeholders. Although it may be costly in terms of time and effort in the immediate term, the greater collaboration and trust among stakeholders are essential for realising the country's objective of a self-improving school system. There is scope to further consolidate the co-construction process, and clarify the roles and responsibilities of the various actors. This includes making explicit how teachers, school leaders and other stakeholders are part of a self-improving school system and will each contribute to realising the vision of the Welsh learner.
- Regional consortia should continue developing their own capacity to deliver quality school improvement services. This includes expanding its services in areas where their offer is not meeting demand. It also requires systematic monitoring and evaluation of the effectiveness of their support to schools, whether this support is provided directly, brokered or through facilitating school-to-school support. Regional consortia are well aware of this need and are working to strengthen the evidence base for their services, often in collaboration with higher education institutes. This collaboration is a positive development that should be further promoted, as higher education/teacher education institutions have largely been an untapped resource in Wales' potential school improvement infrastructure.
- Regional consortia should continue improving their co-ordination and collaboration. There are many benefits from doing so, including more consistency in the quality of school improvement services. Enhanced insight into duplications and best practice may lead to consolidation and jointly offered school improvement services.
- As Wales progresses on its reform journey, it should continue to be open to and explore opportunities for reshaping and clarifying the responsibilities of key stakeholders at various levels of the system as needed. For example, it should consider expanding the mandate of regional consortia to include responsibility for supporting students with additional learning needs.

Remaining issues and recommendations (*continued*)

- Further enhancing the use of evidence and research and linking them to policy. Wales should continue to invest in building research and assessment capacity at all levels of the system, which will be essential for the successful implementation of the curriculum reform. This calls for evaluation of the different policies of the reform journey to understand their progress and impact; these evaluation efforts should be guided by the assessment and evaluation framework under development.
- The Welsh Government should communicate an easy-to-understand narrative about how the different reforms and policies relate to one another and contribute to realising the vision of the Welsh learner. Wales should monitor and celebrate the achievement of key milestones to maintain the enthusiasm for the reform journey. Particular attention needs to be paid to communication about the emerging assessment and evaluation framework. This will give teachers and school leaders the confidence to start changing their practices and become more innovative as the school system transitions from the old curriculum and assessment framework to the new.

Notes

1. WISERD Education is a one million pound investment to advance education research in Wales. Funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW), WISERD Education will undertake research in order to sustain and enhance the quality of learning and the standards of teaching and teacher education in Wales.

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Annex A. Agenda of the OECD team's assessment visit to Wales, 9-11 November 2016

Wednesday, 9 November 2016

Time	Meeting with
08.30–09.30	Deborah McMillan, Corporate Director of Education and Family Support at Bridgend County Borough Council and Lead Director of Central South Consortium (CSC, Central South Wales consortium)
9.30	Whitchurch Primary School: Senior management team, teachers, support staff
11.30	Aled Evans, Director of Education Neath Port Talbot Local Authority and Lead Director of Ein Rhanbarth ar Waith (ERW, South West and Mid Wales consortium)
1.00	Steve Davies – Welsh Government (WG), Director for Education and Schools
2.00	Zenny Saunders – WG, Head of Workforce Strategy Unit
2.45	Steve Vincent – WG, Deputy Director of School Effectiveness Division
3.30	Eithne Hughes, Headteacher of Bryn Elan High School, North Wales
4.15	Hannah Woodhouse, Managing Director of Central South Consortium (CSC, Central South Wales consortium)
5.45	Cabinet Secretary for Education, Kirsty Williams and Deputy Permanent Secretary, Owen Evans
6.45	Dinner with Cabinet Secretary Kirsty Williams and senior staff

Thursday, 10 November 2016

Time	Meeting with
8.45	Ysgol Gyfun Cwm Rhymni, Caerphilly (a Welsh-medium secondary school): Senior management team, teachers and support staff
11.00	Estyn (the education and training inspectorate for Wales)
1.30	Debbie Harteveld, Managing Director of the Education Achievement Service (South East Wales consortium) and Betsan O'Connor, Managing Director of Ein Rhanbarth ar Waith (ERW, South West and Mid Wales consortium)

2.30	Reverend Philip Manghan, Catholic Education Service
3.00	Huw Foster Evans, Previous Managing Director of Gwasanaeth Effeithiolrwydd (GwE, North Wales consortium) and WG Secondee
4.00	Tim Pratt, Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL)
4.30	Karen Cornish – WG, Deputy Director of Curriculum Reform
5.15	Geraint Rees – WG Secondee and Former Head Teacher Ysgol Plasmawr, Cardiff (a Welsh-medium secondary school) and Senior Officer in Cardiff Council

Friday, 11 November 2016

Time	Meeting with
8.45	Emma Williams – WG, Deputy Director of Support for Learners
11.00	Claire Rowland – WG, Deputy Director of Curriculum and Assessment
11.30	Richard Thurston – WG, Head of Research for Education and Skills, Knowledge and Analytical Services
12.15	Professors Dylan Jones and Peter Rabbett, University of Wales Trinity Saint David
1.00	<i>OECD presentation on initial findings</i>
2.00	Steering group meeting

Departure of the OECD team

Annex B. The authors

Beatriz Pont is a Senior Education Policy Analyst with the OECD Directorate for Education and Skills. She currently leads the Education Policy Reviews in OECD countries, covering countries such as Japan, Mexico, Norway, Sweden or Wales and has also led the OECD Education Policy Outlook project. She has managed and contributed to a range of international studies in different areas such as school improvement, school leadership, equity, adult learning and adult skills. Previously Beatriz was a researcher on education and training policies at the Economic and Social Council of the Government of Spain and also worked for Andersen Consulting. She has a BA in political science from Pitzer College, Claremont, California, and holds a MSc in International Affairs from Columbia University. She has been a research fellow at the Institute of Social Science in Tokyo University, at the Interdisciplinary Laboratory for the Evaluation of Public Policies (LIEPP, Sciences Po, Paris) and holds an Honorary Doctorate from Sheffield Hallam University.

Marco Kools is an Education Policy Analyst with the OECD Directorate for Education and Skills. He currently manages the Directorate's policy implementation support work on schools as learning organisations. He previously has led and/or contributed to Education Policy Reviews in the Netherlands, Latvia, Sweden and Wales, worked on the Innovative Learning Environments project and led the development of the Education Today 2013 publication. Prior to joining the OECD in 2012, Marco worked with UNICEF in the Solomon Islands, Laos and at the UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre in Italy. Before that he worked for several years in the field of education in the Netherlands, where in 1999 he started his career as a teacher. Marco holds several degrees including an MBA, an MA in History and a BSc in Educational Sciences, and is currently pursuing a Phd in Public Administration.

Caitlyn Guthrie is working as an Education Policy Analyst with the OECD Directorate for Education and Skills, where she supports engagement efforts with member and partner economies as a part of the global relations team. She has contributed to various Education Policy Reviews. Caitlyn has had diverse previous experiences including work with several non-governmental organisations (NGOs) on education issues, as well as in legislative affairs at the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). She has a BA in English literature and an MA in International Relations and Diplomacy with a certificate in NGO Management.

Annex C. Summary of recommendations from the OECD 2014 report

This annex presents a brief summary of the recommendations of the 2014 OECD review report, *Improving Schools in Wales: An OECD Perspective*.

Meet the learning requirements of its students and deliver equity and quality

Set high expectations and promote the use of differentiated teaching. With a high proportion of low performers, about one in five students living in poverty and the same proportion with special education needs, and low proportions of high performers, Welsh schools need to move towards more personalised learning while still setting high expectations for every child.

Simplify and stabilise the use of targeted funding for students. Reduce the complexity of funding arrangements for the support of disadvantaged students and move towards simple, financially stable and efficient mechanisms.

Recognise and invest in support staff involved in teaching and learning. Provide support staff with continuing professional development and a coherent career structure and move gradually towards the introduction of minimum qualifications, prioritising teaching and learning assistants.

Build professional capital and a culture of collective responsibility for improved learning for all students

Raise the status of the profession and commit to initial teacher training. Attracting and developing high-quality human capital in the profession will be essential to moving the system forward towards educational excellence. In addition to raising the entry requirements into initial teacher training, implement campaigns to strengthen the perception of the profession, continue the ongoing reform and improvement of initial teacher training and engage schools to offer trainees placements. In the longer term, consider raising initial teacher training to the level of a master's degree.

Ensure quality continuous professional development at all career stages. Work with schools, training institutions and school improvement services to strengthen the provision of high-quality professional development aligned with national education priorities. Consider phasing in the new literacy and numeracy strategy and the new teaching skills required.

Streamline and resource school-to-school collaboration. Develop and implement a Welsh strategy for school-to-school collaboration, creating an architecture which encourages schools to select appropriate partners, in an atmosphere of transparency, awareness and support.

Treat developing system leadership as a prime driver of education reform. Offer potential school leaders better career development pathways, including a qualifications framework, mentoring and additional professional development, as part of a coherent national leadership development strategy. Invest in developing leadership

capital across the education system, so that school improvement can be led from within Wales by schools, local authorities and regional consortia.

Create a coherent assessment and evaluation framework:

Ensure that student assessments support learning for all and align with national objectives. Ensure objectives and targets are inclusive for all students and reflect the country's focus on quality and equity. Investigate the impact of national tests on narrowing the curriculum. In the longer term, consider reducing the number of years covered by the Reading and Numeracy Tests, and consider the use of sample-based assessments to measure wider skills.

Simplify professional standards. Simplify and reduce the number of professional standards and base them on a vision of the Welsh teacher and leader. Revised standards should cover all career stages, beginning, intermediate and advanced, and be extended to teaching and learning support staff.

Build school evaluation processes that support school improvement. Ensure the two external school evaluation systems (Estyn's and the school banding system) have greater coherence. In particular, consider making the school banding calculation method more transparent, reducing the frequency with which schools are banded and judging schools on mutually agreed criteria for quality.

Strengthen evaluation and assessment competencies at all levels. Develop teachers' capacity to support students by assessing them against learning objectives using a range of formative assessment methods. Develop data-handling skills among school leaders to inform their school improvement efforts and to appraise school staff, as part of their school development planning processes.

Define and implement policy with a long-term perspective:

Develop a long-term vision and translate it into measurable objectives. Develop a shared vision of the Welsh learner, reflecting the government's commitment to quality and equity, and translate it into a small number of clear measurable long-term objectives. These could include targets to raise attainment for all, reduce the proportion of low performers and/or ensure completion of upper secondary education.

Develop a focused and sequenced long-term education strategy. Together with teachers and other stakeholders, translate these objectives into an adequately resourced longer-term education strategy. The strategy should sequence the development and implementation of the various initiatives, bearing in mind implementation capacity. Invest in building research and assessment capacity at all levels of the system and use reviews strategically and sparingly.

Ensure governance and support structures are effective in delivering reforms. Invest in the professional capital of the regional consortia staff, in particular their pedagogical skills, and commission high-quality expertise. If, over time, consortia are found to not deliver quality improvement services, consider (re-)integrating them into the proposed new distribution of local authorities. The proposed integration of health and social services at the local level offers the DfES an opportunity to integrate and strengthen education service provision, in particular for students with special education needs.

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The Welsh Education Reform Journey

A RAPID POLICY ASSESSMENT

How can Wales ensure the successful implementation of its reforms and ultimately realise its vision of the Welsh learner? This report takes stock of the policies and reforms adopted since 2014 and offers recommendations to inform next steps. It highlights how the Welsh approach to school improvement has moved from a piecemeal and short-term policy orientation towards one that is guided by a longer-term vision. To support the realisation of its education objectives, Wales should continue its 21st century curriculum reform efforts underpinned by sustained investments in key policy areas such as teacher and leadership policy, equity and evaluation and assessment. It should strengthen the implementation process by consolidating the co-construction of policies with key stakeholders, and through better communication and evidence on the Welsh education reform journey. This report will be of value to Wales but also policy makers in other countries looking to ensure the successful implementation of reforms and policies in their education system.

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