



An Chomhairle Náisiúnta Eacnamaíoch agus Shóisialta
National Economic & Social Council

Understanding PISA and What It Tells Us About Educational Standards in Ireland Executive Summary

Executive Summary

This Secretariat paper explores Ireland's performance in Programme of International Student Assessment (PISA) in the past decade and considers the PISA assessment in the context of Ireland's wider system of educational evaluation. It draws on the work of the Educational Research Centre and, indeed, on that of the OECD on PISA, to examine what PISA can and cannot tell us about student performance and the quality of the Irish education system, as well as the broader implications for policy.

The paper finds that the PISA assessment, and what it tells us, is more complicated than a cursory examination of rankings might suggest. This is because rankings give an overly simplistic account of student performance and also because, on its own, the PISA assessment is not a comprehensive measure of educational standards. It notes that while a decline in Ireland's relative reading and mathematics literacy is evident, the magnitude of that decline and how it should be interpreted is less clear.

Although PISA is a useful tool with which to compare and consider relative student performance, overly focusing on rankings can lead to a simplistic interpretation of the results. Regardless of Ireland's level of performance in PISA, the data must be used and interpreted with care. It is only one source of data and should act as a complement to Ireland's own national standards infrastructure. This requires that Ireland's national standards infrastructure be both comprehensive and systematic, which is not yet the case. The paper highlights the lack of alternative data and related analysis with which to consider the quality of the Irish education system and concludes that Ireland needs to develop a more systematic evidence-based approach to educational evaluation.

