



Centre for Education Systems

INTERNATIONAL COMPARATIVE REVIEW

ACCOUNTABILITY POLICY

Summary of country report (3 pages)

Authors: AI generated with human checking
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Ireland

A decorative graphic in the bottom right corner consists of several overlapping, semi-circular segments in shades of dark blue, light blue, and light green, creating a layered, abstract effect.

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Ireland – AI generated Accountability Policy summary

RQ1: Purposes, Values and Aims

The accountability system in the Republic of Ireland is guided by three primary aims: evaluating the quality of education through both external inspection and internal review; monitoring the promotion of equity, inclusion, and wellbeing; and delivering system-wide educational improvement. The system is founded on five core values: Equity and social justice, ensuring all children achieve high-quality outcomes; Quality and continuous improvement, driven by evidence-based evaluation; Transparency, with inspection reports published to foster public trust; Respect and well-being, focusing on creating safe and healthy school environments; and Inclusion, ensuring schools meet diverse pupil needs.

RQ 2 – Levels, measures, and mechanisms of accountability

Ireland's accountability structure is multi-layered, comprising national governance via the Department of Education and Youth (DE), local Boards of Management, and individual schools. This framework utilises both vertical and horizontal accountability mechanisms. Vertical accountability is primarily enacted through the DE's Inspectorate, which conducts external evaluations like Whole School Evaluations and provides structured feedback to drive improvement. Horizontal accountability is centered on School Self-Evaluation (SSE), a mandatory, collaborative process involving principals, teachers, parents, and students. Guided by frameworks like *Looking at Our School 2022*, SSE requires schools to gather evidence, set improvement targets, and monitor progress. Unlike some systems, the publication of comparative school league tables is prohibited by statute.

RQ 3 – Managing change and policy processes

The Department of Education and Youth (DE) leads the development of accountability policy, supported by key actors including the Inspectorate, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), and the Teaching Council. Policy reform is a collaborative process involving extensive consultation with educational stakeholders and academic experts to ensure changes are well-informed and responsive to the needs of the system. For instance, a comprehensive review of inspection approaches is currently underway, engaging with international bodies like the Standing International Conference of Inspectorates (SICI) to inform the ongoing development of inspection processes.

RQ 4 – Assessments of effectiveness and evaluation

The effectiveness of accountability policy is evaluated through several mechanisms. The DE's Inspectorate publishes all its evaluation criteria and conducts Whole School Evaluations and

thematic inspections, which inform accountability reform. The DE also publishes biannual progress reports on its strategic education plans to ensure transparency and track delivery against national priorities. An important check on the system is provided by the formal appearances of the Inspectorate and other DE sections before Parliamentary Committees, which ensures a high level of public accountability for the framework's effectiveness.

RQ 5 – Historical, cultural, and political influences

The evolution of Ireland's accountability system is shaped by key contextual factors. Historically, the system originated in the 19th century with a focus on centralised control, with the 1998 Education Act marking a pivotal shift by legally formalising the Inspectorate's role in promoting quality. More recently, policy has been heavily influenced by neoliberal governance logics emphasizing performativity and efficiency, as well as by transnational actors like the OECD and EU. A significant catalyst for reform was the "PISA shock" of 2009, when an unexpected drop in student performance triggered a surge in reform, legitimising international comparisons and embedding School Self-Evaluation (SSE) as a corrective instrument.

RQ 6 – Impact on outcomes and workforce

Research indicates accountability measures have significant unintended impacts on the workforce, including increased teacher stress and workload. School Self-Evaluation (SSE) is often perceived by teachers as extra work, and there is widespread skepticism about its ability to produce meaningful systemic change, though it is also credited with increasing teacher collaboration and the use of student feedback. Many teachers and principals are critical of inspections, feeling they are rigid and fail to consider socio-economic contexts. While some school leaders view inspection feedback as a useful tool for improvement, many teachers are skeptical that it leads to better student outcomes. The reviewed studies reported no clear evidence on the impact of accountability policy on student performance.

Timeline- recent accountability reforms

- **1998 Education Act:** Rationale: To provide a statutory framework for education. Key Features: Formalised the Inspectorate's role in evaluating quality and established the legal basis for a dual system of internal school self-evaluation and external inspection.
- **2009 "PISA Shock":** Rationale: N/A (sentinel event). Key Features: An unexpected decline in Ireland's PISA results triggered a flurry of reform initiatives, including a national literacy and numeracy strategy and the legitimisation of international comparisons as a policy driver.

- **2012 Mandatory School Self-Evaluation (SSE):** Rationale: To embed a culture of internal accountability and continuous improvement. Key Features: Made SSE a compulsory, collaborative process for all schools, focused on improving literacy, numeracy, and other aspects of teaching and learning.
- **2022 Looking at Our School (LAOS) Framework:** Rationale: To ensure consistent quality standards and foster internal accountability. Key Features: Provided a revised quality framework with clear domains and standards to guide the SSE process and external inspections.
- **2022 Cineáltas - Action Plan on Bullying:** Rationale: To create safe and respectful learning environments. Key Features: A whole-education approach to prevent and address bullying, centered on a child rights-based approach and reflecting a wider system commitment to student well-being.