

Devolved to Fail

The Decline of Welsh Education and the
Urgent Case for Reform

Ellie Craven

ONWARD >

About Onward

Onward's mission is to develop bold and practical ideas to boost economic opportunity, build national resilience, and strengthen communities across all parts of the United Kingdom. We are not affiliated to any party but believe in mainstream conservatism. Our vision is to address the needs of the whole country: young and old, urban and rural, for all communities across the UK – particularly places that have too often felt neglected or ignored by Westminster.

We believe in an optimistic conservatism that is truly national – one that recognises the value of markets, supported by a streamlined state that is active not absent. We are unapologetic about standing up to vested interests, putting power closer to people, and supporting the hardworking and aspirational.

Thanks

Onward is a small non-profit that relies on the generosity of our donors and patrons to do our work. We are indebted to our Founding Patrons: Martyn Rose, Michael Spencer, David Meller, Bjorn Saven, Richard Oldfield, Robert Walters, Tim Sanderson, James Alexandroff, Jason Dalby, Graham Edwards, John Nash and Theodore Agnew. Without this philanthropic support, our work would not be possible.

In particular, the author would like to thank Nicholas Stephenson for his work on this project. Any mistakes are the author's own.

About the author

Ellie is a Senior Researcher at Onward. She was previously an adviser in the House of Commons specialising in the Department for Energy Security & Net Zero. She holds a BA in History from the University of Bristol and an MA in Politics and Contemporary History from King's College London.



Foreword

Looking at education standards across the UK, there is a clear outlier - Wales. The UK is ranked 14th amongst OECD countries in the PISA tables. But if Wales were to be ranked as an individual country, it would come just above Vietnam in 34th place.

A slew of reforms have been implemented in England in the last 20 years - the success of which are clear: 89% of schools in England are rated Good or Outstanding by Ofsted, compared to just 68% in 2009-10 when we came into power. But the Welsh government continued with outdated practices and even made actively regressive decisions. While England moved away from cueing, Wales continues to teach with it. While England moved to a knowledge-based curriculum, Wales still uses a skills-based one. And while England introduced academies for failing schools, Wales has resisted and has even abolished league tables making it almost impossible for parents to identify which schools are failing children. On top of this, the impact of the pandemic means that all progress since 2012 has been wiped out.

For over 25 years, the Labour government in Wales has overseen a deterioration of pupil performance and standards, and the difference between Wales and its neighbouring nations is only projected to get worse. If nothing changes, Wales will be on par with Romania in international rankings by 2040. The need for change is not just urgent, but imperative and this important report by Onward makes that crystal clear.

Mims Davies

Shadow Secretary of State for Wales

Introduction

Onward's recent report, [Lessons Learned](#), looked at England's education system since 2010 and the legacy that successive Conservative governments have left through their reforms: the overall picture of English school performance is one of structural reform and significant improvement to standards.¹

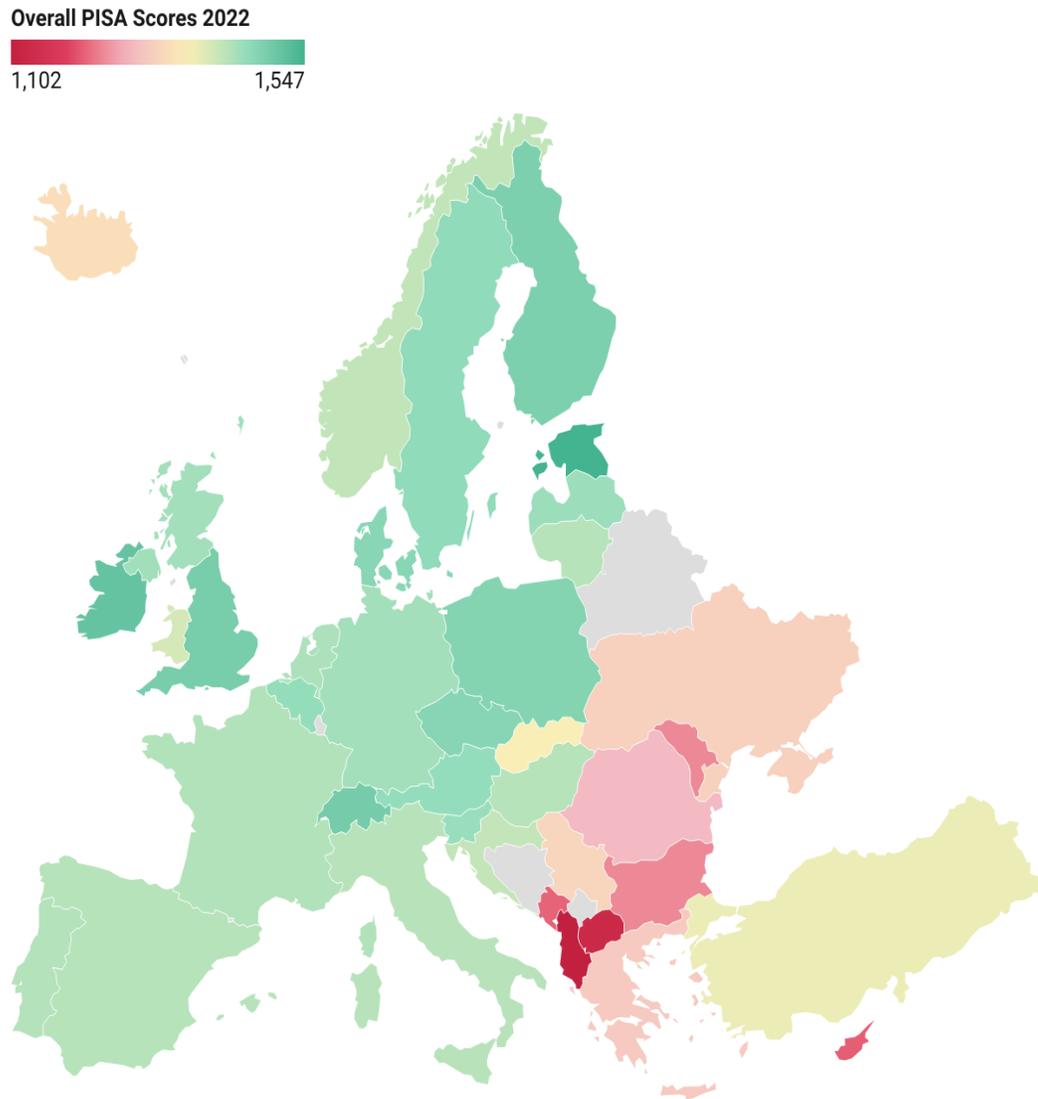
What is clear from *Lessons Learned* is that England's education outcomes exceed those of its neighbouring nations where education is devolved. This difference is particularly stark in Wales. This policy brief examines education outcomes in Wales, how these outcomes will get worse if no action is taken, and the reforms that should be incorporated to improve the education of children across the country.

Education outcomes

The Programme for International Student Assessment, PISA, is an international league table that ranks OECD countries by pupils' performance in maths, reading, science and overall scores at age 15.

Figure 1: 2022 PISA scores

Source: PISA 2022



Created with Datawrapper

As shown in Figure 1, overall PISA scores across Europe vary with Western European countries performing better than Eastern European countries. And in the UK, England has the highest PISA score followed by Scotland and Northern Ireland, with Wales performing the worst.

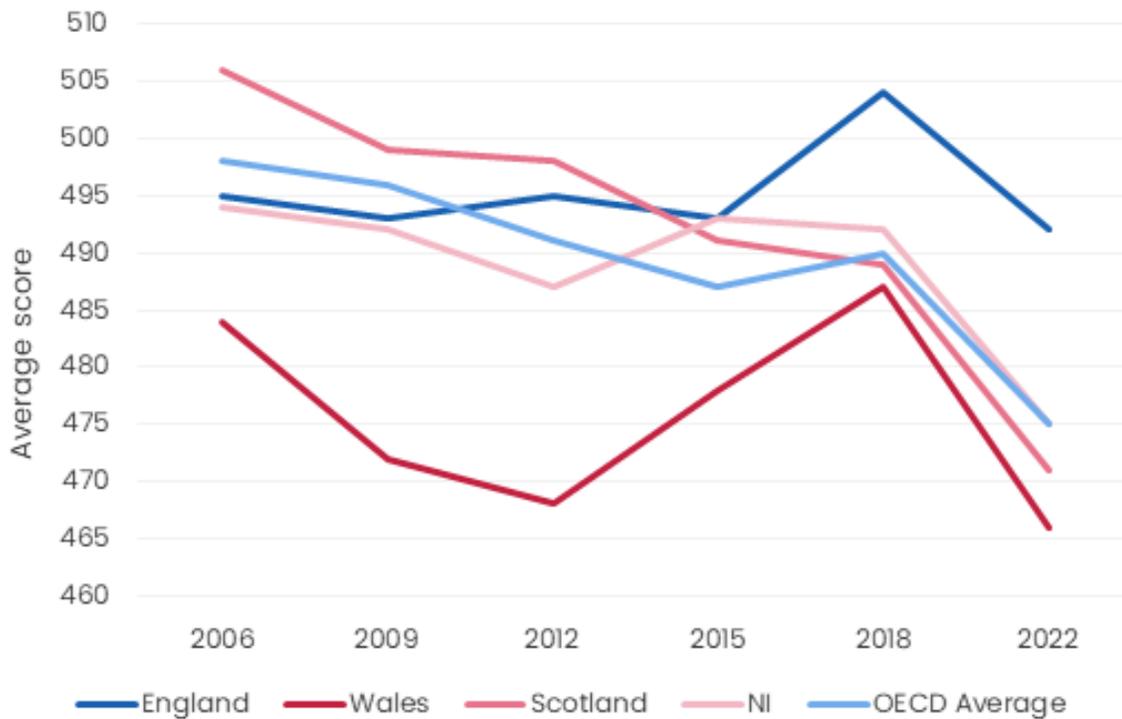
Between 2009 and 2022, England rose in the OECD PISA school rankings from 27th in the world for maths performance to 11th. In science, England rose from 16th to 13th. But it is a very different story in Wales. In fact, attainment in Wales has stagnated so much that the average Welsh pupils perform only as well as the most disadvantaged pupils in England.²

Devolved to Fail

Wales has consistently scored lower than England, Scotland, Northern Ireland and the OECD average in the PISA league tables for reading and mathematics since 2006.³

Figure 2: Mathematics PISA scores by nation

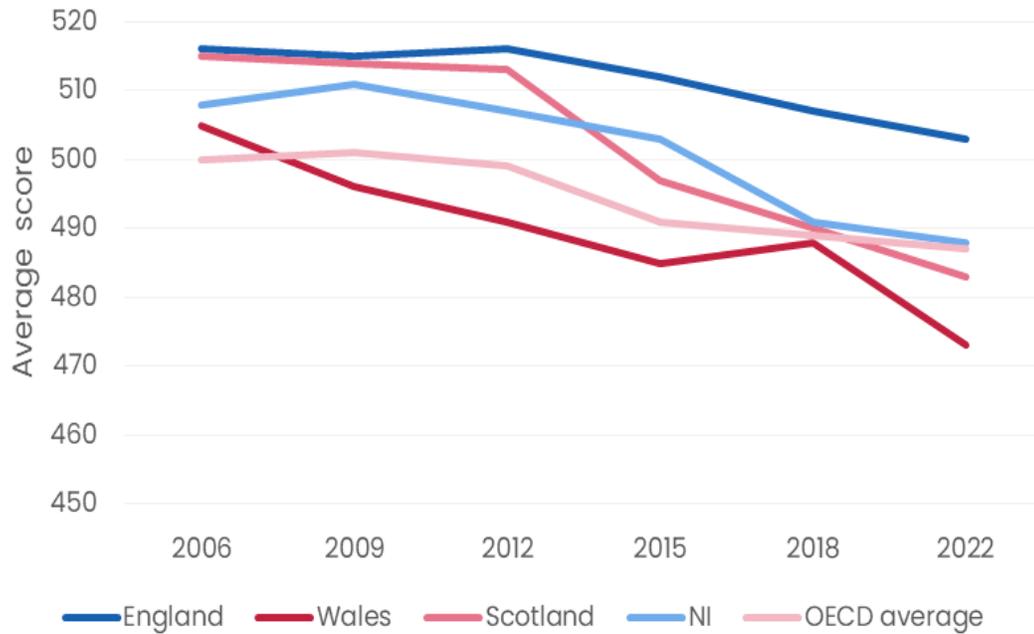
Source: PISA 2022, 2009 and 2006 National Reports



As Figure 2 shows, Wales has continually scored lower than the other UK nations and the OECD average. There was an improvement in mathematics after 2012, but the impact of missed and restricted schooling as a result of the COVID pandemic led to a significant worsening in outcomes. In 2022, England's average PISA score was 492 compared to Wales' 466.

Figure 3: Science PISA scores by nation

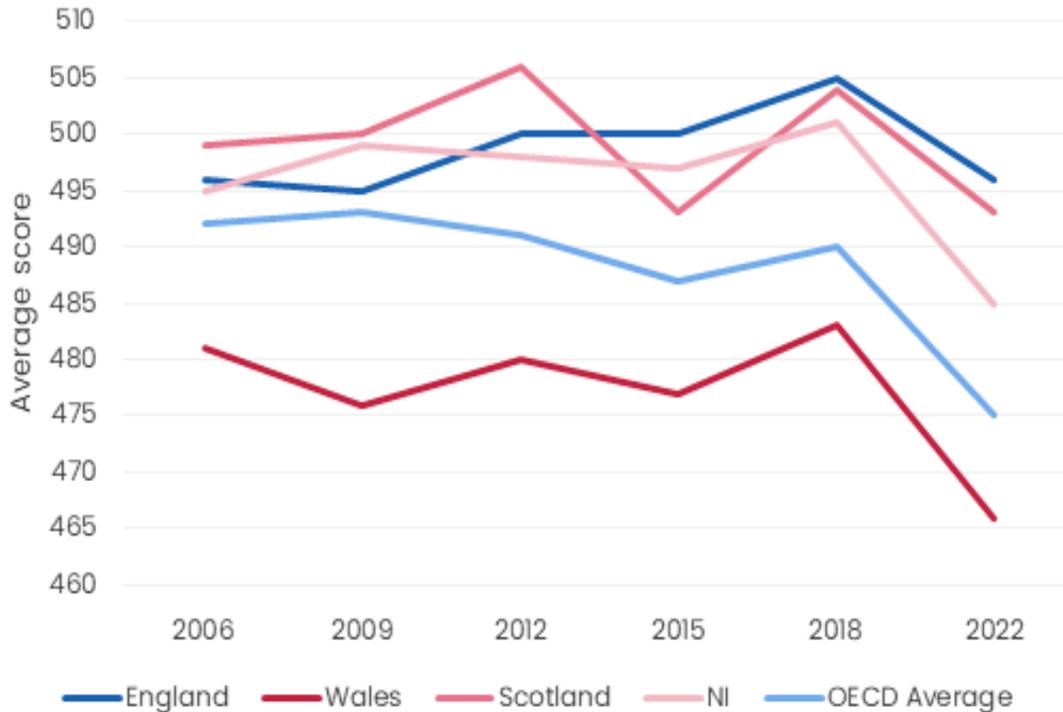
Source: PISA 2022, 2009 and 2006 National Report



For science too, England's average PISA score was 503 compared to Wales' 473.⁴ And, as shown in Figure 3, there was progress in Wales between 2015 and 2018, but since then science outcomes have plummeted sharply. This may be explained by the impact of the COVID pandemic and, as shown, the pandemic had a more negative impact on Wales than in England, Scotland, Northern Ireland and the OECD average.

Figure 4: Reading PISA scores by nation

Source: PISA 2022, 2009 and 2006 National Report



Similarly, there is a significant divergence between reading outcomes in Wales and England, Scotland, Northern Ireland and the OECD average. In 2022, England's average PISA score was 496 compared to Wales' 466. And the OECD average was 475.

A factor in these very different reading abilities by age 15 can be found right at the start of children's education in the methods used to teach them to read. Wales still uses the discredited 'cueing method' to teach reading. This method encourages children to infer the meaning of words.⁵ Experts have found that the cueing method leads to children guessing words instead of sounding them out, with the technique being proven to damage the ability of children to learn to read.⁶

In fact, an ITV investigation highlighted in 2012 that Estyn had found a fifth of primary school children in Wales were functionally illiterate, and that the continued use of the cueing method risks putting more children in this position.⁷⁸ Indeed, as shown in Figure 4, reading levels in Wales have significantly worsened since 2012.

As part of this report, Freedom of Information requests were submitted to every local authority in Wales to enquire about the methods that they used to teach reading. Four local authorities then directed to the information being held only at individual primary school level, though many subsequently responded to say they did not hold the data

either. Of the 73% of individual schools that responded from Newport, Blaenau Gwent, Conwy, and Flintshire, 77% reported using cuing strategies.

It should be noted that some schools were unclear on whether cue cards, which can be included within systematic synthetic programs, constituted part of the cueing approach to teaching early reading, leading to the two being conflated. Further, in some cases schools operated on a child-by-child basis, using systematic synthetic phonics (SSP) as their principal method but employing cueing strategies for particular children that were struggling.

After the Rose Review, a parliamentary inquiry in 2005, the cueing method was abolished in England. Since then, England mandated the teaching of systematic synthetic phonics instead which teaches children to connect the sounds of spoken words with the letters.⁹

Since this decision in England, and as shown in Figure 4, reading test scores have risen with England now being near the top of international rankings. But, reading standards in Wales have progressively worsened.

Worsening standards may therefore also be explained by Curriculum for Wales which has come under criticism for being too vague. Rather than being based on knowledge, the Welsh curriculum is skilled-based, listing concepts and buzzwords with no clear definition that are difficult to assess. For example, it assesses whether pupils are considered to be:

- “Ethical, informed citizens ready to be citizens of Wales and the world
- Ambitious, capable learners ready to learn throughout their lives.
- Enterprising, creative contributors ready to play a full part in life and work
- Healthy, confident individuals ready to lead fulfilling lives as valued members of society.”¹⁰

Education projections in Wales

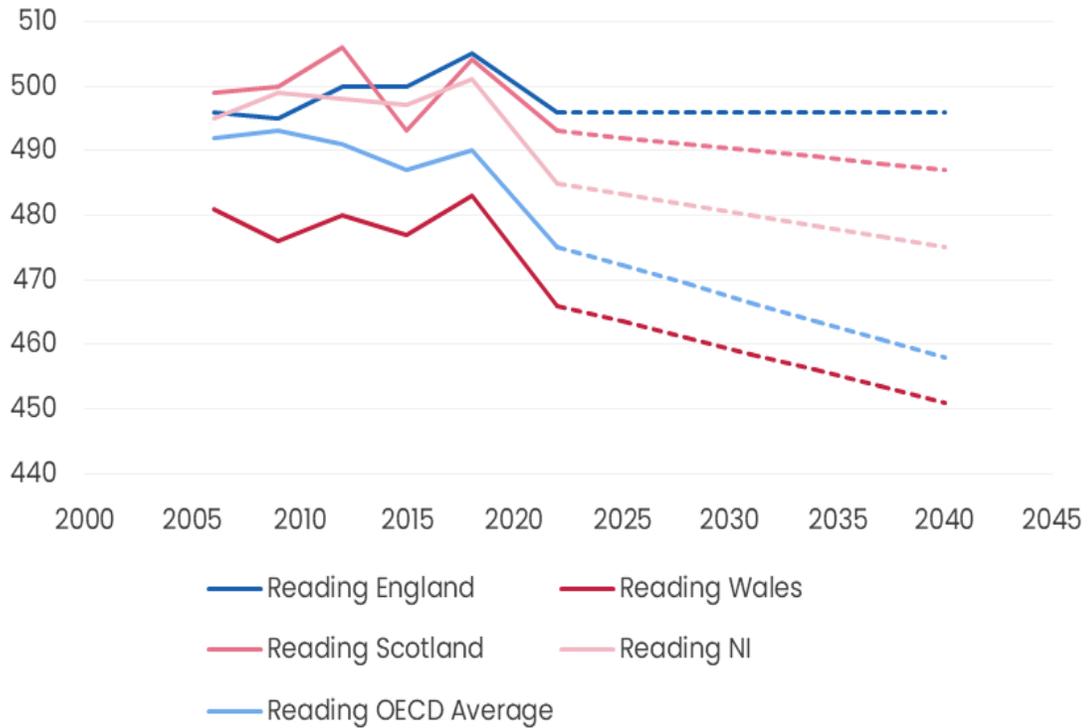
Disrupted education due to the COVID pandemic affected the majority of OECD countries’ PISA scores, but Wales’ decline was particularly large and took their PISA scores significantly below the average across these countries. Indeed, experts found that the pandemic erased all progress in Wales since 2012.¹¹

Using OECD PISA rankings, Onward has projected where Wales will fall on reading, science, and overall outcomes by 2040, based on the PISA test carried out every three years. Between 2018 and 2022 there is a four-year gap as a result of the COVID pandemic, during which time results fell across OECD countries. We have incorporated data from

2006, 2009, 2012 and 2015, in addition to the two most recent results, to get a more representative picture.

Figure 5: PISA reading projections

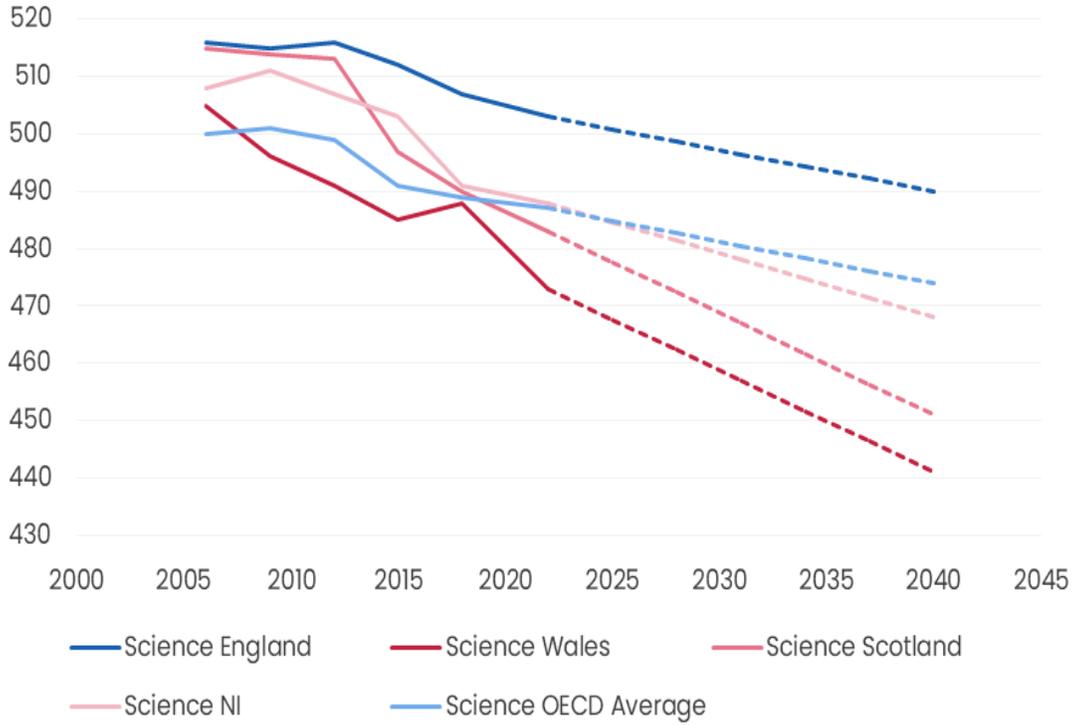
Source: PISA 2022, 2009 and 2006 National Report



As shown in figures 5 and 6, if the rates of decline from 2006 to 2022 in reading and science are maintained, Wales will continue to fall in the international league tables for these subjects.

Figure 6: PISA science projections

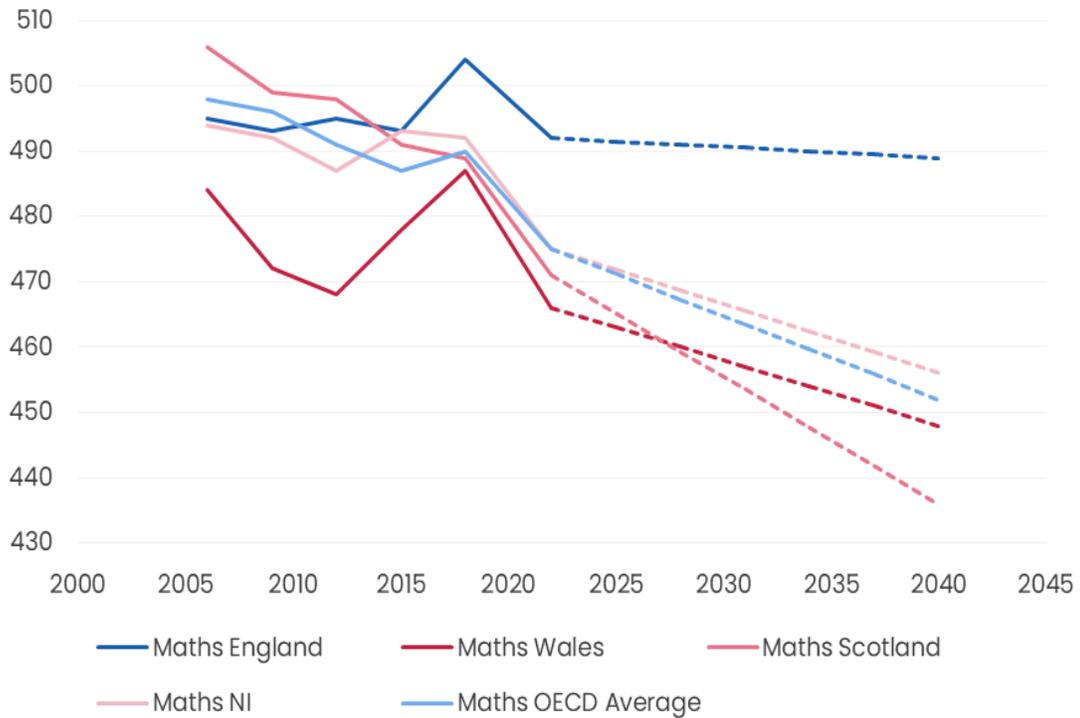
Source: PISA 2022, 2009 and 2006 National Report



Similarly, Figure 7 shows a progressive worsening of maths outcomes in Wales. England and Wales saw an improvement in maths outcomes in the run up to the pandemic, but standards fell sharply following it. But, unlike England, Wales is projected to continue on this sharp downward trend into 2040.

Figure 7: PISA maths projections

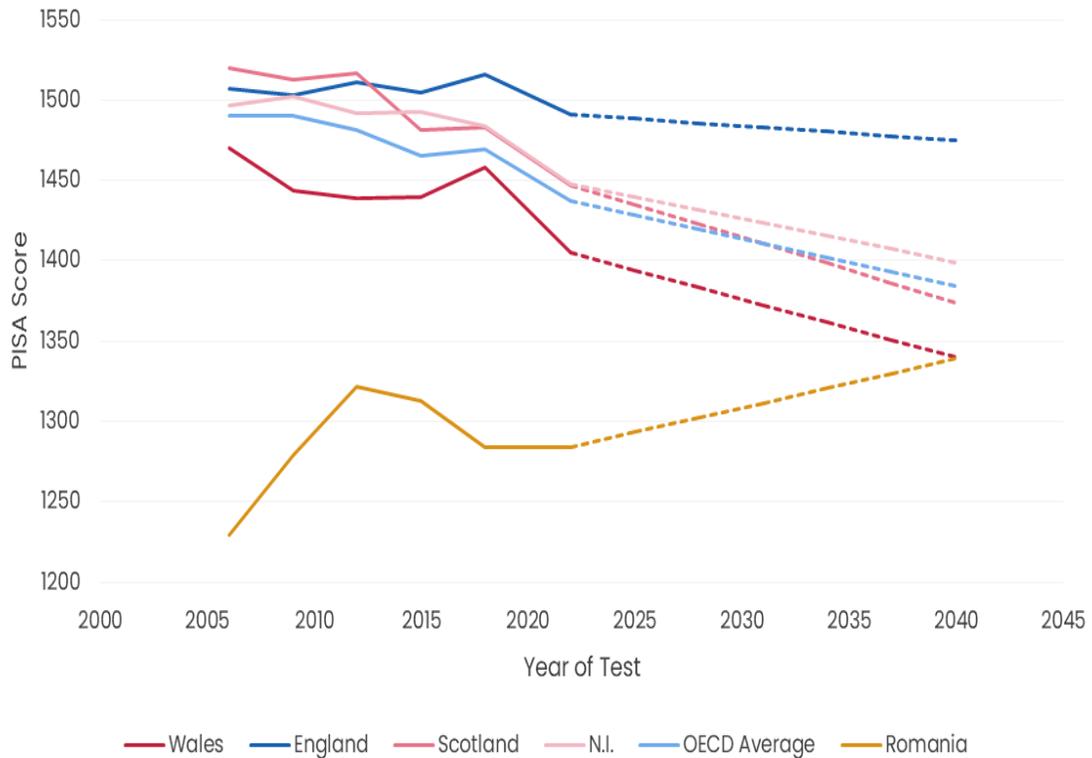
Source: PISA 2022, 2009 and 2006 National Report



And taken together, Figure 8 shows that by 2040 Wales' overall PISA ranking will continue to decrease at a rate that puts it on par with Romania whose overall rankings have been historically low. Onward analysis shows that improvements in overall levels in Romania in recent years and worsening of standards in Wales sees these countries at a similar level by 2040.¹² And Romania will overtake Wales by the academic year 2040-41.

Figure 8: PISA overall rankings projections

Source: PISA 2022, 2009 and 2006 National Report



This year's A-Level and GCSE results for Wales show a continuing and worrying trend in education outcomes in the country. The A-level and GCSE pass rates are on course with Onward's findings that outcomes will not be improving at the rate they urgently need in the next decades. While the pass rate for A-levels and GCSEs (A*-C) have increased from 2024 to 2025 by 0.7 percentage points and 0.3 percentage points, respectively, this is no cause for celebration and exhibits an essential stagnation in progress. What's more, Wales was the only nation to see a fall in A-level grades marked at A*-A from 29.9% in 2024 to 29.5% this year. This puts Wales in a critical position not only amongst UK nations, but internationally.

School inspections and attendance

The difference in standards between English and Welsh schools is also highlighted through the country's respective schools inspectorates - Ofsted for England and Estyn for Wales. Their judgement criteria show a stark difference in how school performance

is measured between the two countries. Ofsted mark against the following criteria when assessing English schools:

- Effectiveness of leadership and management
- Quality of teaching, learning and assessment
- Personal development, behaviour and welfare
- Outcomes for pupils¹³

Estyn's undertake their assessments on five measures:

- Learning
- Well-being and attitudes to learning
- Teaching and learning experience
- Care, support and guidance
- Leadership and management¹⁴

Ofsted inspection outcomes, as of December 2024, highlight the difference in results between England and Wales. The proportion of schools assessed to be good or outstanding for each key judgement were found to be:

- 84% for quality of education
- 94% for behaviour and attitudes
- 97% for personal development
- 89% for leadership and management¹⁵

And only around a tenth of schools were judged as requiring improvement or inadequate.

But in the 2023/24 academic year, Estyn inspected 31 secondary schools and found that:

- 68% were given a recommendation to strengthen and refine their self-evaluation and/or improvement planning processes.
- 65% were given a recommendation regarding the progressive development of pupils' skills.
- 52% received a recommendation regarding the improvement of teaching.
- 48% were given a recommendation to improve attendance.¹⁶

Attendance in Welsh schools is a significant issue. Estyn predicts that if the current rate of progress is maintained, it will take more than a decade to get back to levels of attendance that were seen before the pandemic in secondary schools.¹⁷ The overall absence rate in Wales is 12%, with the same figure for England being notably lower at 7.1%.¹⁸ The divergence in attendance rates between Wales and England cannot be explained by the COVID pandemic, though: pre-pandemic absence was 10.8% for England and 17.1% for Wales. What's more, in 2023/24, over a third of pupils in Wales

Devolved to Fail

missed at least 10% of lessons.¹⁹ Conversely, only a fifth of English pupils missed at least 10% of lessons.²⁰

Recommendations

Recommendation 1 – Mandate that failing schools be taken over by academy trusts

Recommendation 1.1 Re-introduce league tables to give parents more informed choice and to identify more clearly which schools should be academised

While PISA rankings show how schools in Wales perform in aggregate relative to other countries, there is a lack of information available to distinguish between schools within Wales. The Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) found that there are significant differences in accountability between Welsh and English schools.²¹

Wales abolished school league tables and single-word judgements, making immediate consequences for poor performing schools less severe. This is an issue not only for measuring the outcomes of schools themselves, but also for parents when choosing which school to send their children. The Welsh Government should therefore reintroduce league tables not only for better accountability, but so that failing schools can be identified to be turned into academies.

Academy-like institutions already exist in Wales which could be used as a model for Welsh academy trusts. The Grŵp is a good example of an academy-like umbrella organisation that oversees the operation of three colleges in North Wales. It's Wales' largest further education organisation and one of the largest further education college groups in the UK.

They have a higher success rate at A-level compared to the Welsh average:

- The 2024 pass rates at Grŵp Llandrillo Menai increased compared to the previous year with 99% of students passing their A-levels, and 77.3% achieving A*-C grades.
- Across Wales, the overall pass rate at A-level was 97.5% with 13.5% of grades the top A*.

And Grŵp Llandrillo Menai has achieved its best-ever results for acceptances by Russell Group Universities, with 64 students securing places, including one at Oxford University. A record six students have also gained the grades to study Medicine, the highest number in the group's history.²²

Recommendation 2 - Reform the national curriculum to move away from a skills based curriculum to a knowledge based one, including mandating the phonics reading system

As identified, the national curriculum in Wales is underpinned by concepts and buzzwords rather than clearly defined outcomes. Evidence shows that the skills-based approach may not be the most effective way to develop skills and knowledge.²³ It is also clear that the cueing method of teaching children to read is not working effectively and is leading to poorer outcomes in Wales.

Recommendation 3 - Implement Estyn's recommendations on increasing school attendance at an accelerated rate

As identified above, attendance rates in Wales are a significant issue and with Estyn predicting that if current levels of absence are maintained, it would take Wales more than a decade to return to levels of attendance that were seen before the pandemic in secondary schools.

The 2023-2024 annual Estyn report included recommendations on the following poor practices. They identified key areas that schools are underperforming and should be improved which should be implemented:

- Leaders not using data to monitor pupils' attendance rigorously enough
- A lack of effective communication with parents and carers.
- A lack of coordination in schools' approaches.
- A lack of a whole school approach, with attendance being seen as the responsibility of one person or a small pastoral team.
- Leaders not setting ambitious enough targets for attendance.
- Leaders are too slow to intervene when pupils' attendance falls.
- Schools not working well enough in partnership with outside agencies.²⁴

Conclusion

Education outcomes in Wales are significantly lower than its neighbouring countries not only within the UK, but across other OECD countries. Without meaningful reforms, analysis in this paper shows that performance may continue to worsen.

The full impact of the COVID pandemic on educational standards across the world will take time to show as pupils who experienced disrupted education move through their schools systems. Critically, the next wave of PISA rankings for 2025 (due to be published next year) will capture those who completed primary school and moved into secondary school during that period.

For Wales, the significantly worse outcomes that were apparent well before then mean that there is no time to waste in implementing measures to avert their predicted decline in international ranking. This paper offers options for promoting transparency, improving the worst performing schools, updating teaching methods and making sure more children are in school to benefit from these reforms.

Endnotes

1. Lessons Learned, Page 6, Onward
2. Lessons Learned, Page 6, Onward
3. PISA 2022, 2009 and 2006 National Report
4. PISA 2022, 2009 and 2006 National Report
5. ITV Article, [link](#)
6. DERA report, [link](#)
7. ITV Article, [link](#)
8. Estyn report, [link](#)
9. DERA report, [link](#)
10. Curriculum for Wales, Gov.Wales, [link](#)
11. IFS report, [link](#)
12. PISA 2022, 2009 and 2006 National Report
13. Ofsted grading system, [link](#)
14. Estyn report, [link](#)
15. Gov.uk stats, [link](#)
16. Estyn report, [link](#)
17. BBC article, [link](#)
18. BBC article, [link](#); DFE stats, [link](#), Onward Analysis
19. BBC article, [link](#)
20. BBC article, [link](#)
21. IFS report, [link](#)
22. Grŵp Llandrillo Menai, [link](#)
23. IFS report, [link](#)
24. Gov.uk report, [link](#)

Support Onward

Onward is an independent, not-for-profit thinktank. We rely on the generous support of individuals and trusts, as well as partnerships with charities and businesses, to support our leading programme of research and events.

Individual and Trust donations

Onward's core programme of research is funded by individual and trust donations. If you are an individual or represent a philanthropic trust and would like to support our ongoing research agenda, we would love to hear from you. We do not accept corporate funding for research reports. Please contact us on office@ukonward.com if you would like to donate by cheque or you can donate electronically using Onward's account details below.

UK Onward Thinktank Ltd
Not-for-profit company no. 11326052
Bank: Natwest
Account number: 21328412
Sort code: 50-10-05

Please note that Onward retains copyright and full editorial control over any written research it produces, irrespective of funding.

Partnerships with companies and charities

Alongside our research, we want to work closely with charities, trusts and businesses, large and small, to further the political debate and bring the expertise and ideas from outside government to bear on the policymaking process.

If you would like to partner with Onward as a sponsor of one of our roundtable events or conferences, or to join our Business Leaders Network to engage further with our work, please get in touch at office@ukonward.com.

A commitment to transparency

Onward is committed to transparency and will publish the names of individuals and organisations who give us more than £5,000 of support each year. This is published on our website twice a year.

www.ukonward.com

ONWARD >

Devolved to Fail