

# The impact of school and neighbourhood social mix on Leaving Certificate performance<sup>1</sup>

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## INTRODUCTION

There has been growing interest internationally in how school and neighbourhood contexts make a difference to academic achievement. However, it can be difficult to disentangle school and neighbourhood effects in countries where all students in a particular area attend their local school. The degree of choice among second-level schools in Ireland means that we can provide more precise estimates of school and neighbourhood effects than those available internationally. Using longitudinal data, we can also explore the influence of both the primary and second-level school attended on academic outcomes.

## DATA AND METHODS

The research draws on data from Cohort '98 of the Growing Up in Ireland study, which has followed a sample of children and their families since they were nine years old. Information on Leaving Certificate (upper secondary) performance is measured in terms of the 'points' used for higher education entry purposes and the information was collected at 20 years of age. Prior academic performance is measured in terms of grade point average achieved in the Junior Certificate (lower secondary) exam.

A multidimensional approach to measuring family socioeconomic background is used, including social class, maternal education, experience of financial strain (difficulty making ends meet) and family type. At the school level, DEIS status<sup>2</sup> is used to proxy a working-class student composition while fee-paying status is used to proxy a middle-class student composition. Neighbourhood composition is based on the proportion in the local electoral division who are unemployed, have lower levels of education and are lone-parent families. In addition, a parent-reported

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<sup>1</sup> This Bulletin summarises the findings from: E. Smyth & M. Darmody (2026), The impact of school social composition and neighbourhood social mix on upper secondary exam performance in Ireland, *International Journal of Comparative Sociology*. Available at: DOI: 10.1177/00207152231223725. This article was prepared as part of the Horizon 2020 PIONEERED project (grant agreement no. 101004392).

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<sup>2</sup> The Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) programme provides additional resources and supports to schools serving socio-economically disadvantaged communities.

measure of perceived disorder in the local area (e.g. graffiti and visible drinking/drug-taking) is used. Cross-classified multilevel models are used to provide precise estimates of school and neighbourhood effects, taking account of family socioeconomic background.

## **RESULTS**

Leaving Certificate performance varies more between schools than between neighbourhoods. Performance differs significantly by mother's education, social class, family type and experience of financial strain. These differences are sizeable, with a gap of over 100 points between the children of graduate mothers and those whose mothers have junior cycle education or less.

Even taking account of social background, students in DEIS schools have much lower grades than those in socially mixed schools while those in fee-paying schools have higher grades. Those who attended an Urban Band 1<sup>3</sup> DEIS primary school have lower grades, even accounting for second-level school social mix. Neighbourhood characteristics also make a difference to achievement, with lower grades in areas characterised by higher levels of socioeconomic disadvantage and more neighbourhood disorder.

Analyses also took account of prior performance at Junior Certificate, which changed the picture somewhat. Some of the family characteristics influence earlier school achievement but do not have an additional effect when earlier grades are taken into account. However, those from professional and graduate backgrounds make greater academic progress between the Junior and Leaving Certificate exams than those from other social groups. Significant differences by school social mix remain, with lower performance (relative to Junior Certificate grades) among those who attended DEIS second-level or Urban Band 1 primary schools and higher performance among those in fee-paying schools.<sup>4</sup> The effect of living in a more deprived area is reduced in size but is still significant when prior grades are considered.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The findings show the importance of taking a multidimensional approach to measuring family background, as maternal education, social class, financial strain and family type all have independent effects on exam performance. The social mix of the school attended and of the neighbourhood in which young people live makes a difference to their academic achievement, even taking account of their family circumstances. The effects are found to be cumulative, with both the primary and second-level school attended affecting grades.

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<sup>3</sup> Urban Band 1 schools have the most socioeconomically disadvantaged profile.

<sup>4</sup> Other research based on GUI data does show that the grade advantage of those in fee-paying schools is explained by higher reading and mathematics test scores before entry.

While schools serving disadvantaged communities are provided with additional supports and resources through the DEIS programme, these do not appear sufficient to bridge the gap in outcomes, at least for this cohort of young people. The findings therefore add to the body of evidence which suggests the need for additional supports for schools serving the most deprived communities, soon to be the basis of a DEIS Plus designation. It is important to note that not all socioeconomically disadvantaged young people live in deprived areas and/or attend DEIS schools, indicating the need for additional supports to enable these students to reach their potential.