

Commission on School Reform

Questions to ask when Scotland's PISA 2025 results are published: Recovery from Covid or long-term improvement?

The next results of the Programme for International Student Assessment will be released by the OECD on 8 September 2026. In autumn 2025, PISA 2025 assessed a representative sample of 15-year-old students in science, mathematics and reading. Between the two previous rounds of PISA (2018 and 2022), there had been evidence of a decline in Scottish attainment caused by Covid. That effect is likely to be weakening with time, and so the 2025 results will probably show an improvement over 2022. The Scottish government will – perfectly reasonably – greet any improvement as good news, but the results need to be placed in the context of analogous improvements in other countries, and also in the long-term context of Scotland's slow decline in PISA assessments for the past two decades. This note suggests some questions that should be asked of any claims that the results show Scottish education to be on a path to sustained recovery

1. How does the improvement from 2022 to 2025 compare to longer-term trends?

For comparison over the long term, some selected results for Scotland are:

Scotland	2009	2018	2022	Covid effect (2022-2018)
Science	514	490	483	-7
Mathematics	499	489	471	-18
Reading	502	504	493	-11

Approximate sampling error of these differences: science, 4.8; mathematics, 4.5; reading, 5.1.

So the questions for 2025 are:

Do the 2025 results get back to the last pre-Covid round in 2018?

Do the 2025 results get back to the position in 2009, the last round before the introduction of the Curriculum for Excellence?

2. How does the Scottish recovery from Covid compare to other countries?

One way of assessing whether any improvement is more than the waning of the Covid impact is to compare it with what happened elsewhere. The most relevant external comparison is with England. England's trajectory since 2009 is:

England	2009	2018	2022	Covid effect (2022-2018)
Science	515	507	503	-4
Mathematics	493	504	492	-12
Reading	496	505	496	-9

Approximate sampling error of these differences: science, 4.8; mathematics, 4.5; reading, 5.1.

So the question for 2025 is:

Comparing 2025 with 2022, is the recovery in Scotland greater than the recovery in England?

3. Has the improvement been found at all levels of attainment?

This can be measured by the PISA scores of the top and bottom 10%. In science and reading, the Covid effect was worse for low-attaining students than for high attainers; in mathematics, the effect was the same in each group. Over the long term, the decline in all three domains has been worse for low-attainers than for high attainers.

Scotland	2009	2018	2022	Covid effect (2022-2018)
Top 10%				
Science	638	617	614	-3
Mathematics	619	610	595	-15
Reading	627	627	623	-4
Bottom 10%				
Science	391	366	353	-13
Mathematics	381	367	352	-15
Reading	376	383	361	-22

Approximate sampling error of these differences: science, 6.4; mathematics, 6.2; reading, 6.9.

So the questions for 2025 are:

Is the recovery from Covid spread across the range of attainment?

Over the long term, have low attainers begun to recover without there being any harm to high attainers?

4. Has the improvement been found at all levels of social advantage and disadvantage?

PISA measures social advantage and disadvantage by a scale which can be divided into quarters. The effect of Covid was most severe in the most socially disadvantaged students, as this table shows, and (allowing for sampling error) there was probably no effect on socially advantaged students:

Scotland	2009	2018	2022	Covid effect (2022-2018)
Most advantaged quarter				
Science	567	535	541	6
Mathematics	549	528	532	4
Reading	550	545	550	5
Least advantaged quarter				
Science	469	451	445	-6
Mathematics	455	456	429	-27
Reading	460	471	457	-14

Approximate sampling error of these differences: science, 6.4; mathematics, 6.2; reading, 7.1.

So the question for 2025 is:

Is the recovery from Covid spread across the range of social circumstances?