etbi
Education and Training Boards Ireland
Boird Oideachais agus Oiliúna Éireann

Development of the new Digital Strategy for Schools

Submission

Submission on the Development of the new Digital Strategy for Schools

Respondent's Name: Education & Training Boards Ireland

Personal or Organisational: Organisational

Organisation/Institution: Education & Training Boards Ireland (ETBI) welcomes the development of the new Digital Strategy for Schools.

Education and Training Boards (ETBs) have responsibility for education and training, youth work and a range of other statutory functions. As of February 2021, ETBs are patrons of 27 Community National Schools (CNS)s, and 246 of all second level schools in Ireland providing quality multi-denominational second level education to over 100,000 students.

ETB schools pride themselves on catering for students from diverse backgrounds. All ETB schools are firmly rooted in their local communities with an ethos underpinned by the core values of: Excellence in Education, Care, Respect, Equality and Community.

ETB schools aim to provide quality learning and teaching environments that are inclusive, learner-centred, and holistic. Central to this philosophy is full access and engagement with the curriculum using approaches and methodologies that ensure optimum outcomes for young people.

(1000 characters)

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1. **Please outline your observations and comments on how the existing Digital Strategy for Schools 2015-2020 has supported the integration of digital technologies into teaching, learning and assessment practices in schools. (20000 characters)**

    - The Digital Strategy 2015-2020 has provided schools with the necessary structure to more confidently integrate digital technologies into teaching, learning and assessment. It laid out ambitious, appropriate, high level goals for teaching learning and assessment, as well as teacher professional learning, leadership, research and policy, and ICT infrastructure. Since its release, use of ICT as a teaching and learning tool has enhanced learner experience and outcomes.
    - The impact of ICT on teaching and learning has been acknowledged through Department of Education Inspection Reports, WSEs/MLLs. A number of factors have contributed to this including capital investment, professional development and an emphasis on whole school planning.

- **Funding/Capital Investment**
    - Increased funding has been a key factor in supporting the aims of the Digital Strategy 2015-2020. Over the last five years, many schools have utilised this funding to commence their "digital journey" through the installation of Wi-Fi or investment in devices. Others invested in additional devices to facilitate a better device to learner ratio, which in many cases has resulted in more available access to ICT for learners and had a positive impact on learner experience.
    - The flexibility and agency offered to individual school communities in matters of investment through the Strategy enabled schools to respond to their individual contexts and cater for local needs. In particular, flexible funding measures supported the implementation of Digital Plans locally, allowing schools to strategically plan, distribute and share resources across the school community. Schools suggest at this point that this meaningful allocation of resources across different school contexts has had a positive impact on teaching, learning and assessment in these contexts.

- **Whole School Approaches**
    - The Digital Strategy placed a significant emphasis on a whole school approach to ICT, particularly through planning, which has supported the integration of digital technologies into teaching, learning and assessment. In particular, the development of Digital Plans through the Strategy has helped to embed digital technologies across whole school communities.
    - This emphasis on a whole school approach to ICT has facilitated the engagement of more members of staff in digital technologies and ensured that this area is no longer just the remit of a few "digital champions". This wider engagement and responsibility has also enabled the integration of ICT

across a variety of curricular areas as well as other aspects of school life, ultimately facilitating greater integration of digital skills across schools.
    - Whole school planning for the integration of digital technology has facilitated greater opportunities for collaborative planning. In this regard, the digital planning website was particularly useful for schools.
    - Collaboration has also been facilitated across school communities through resource sharing between Digital Learning Teams.

- **School Self-Evaluation and LAOS**
    - Building on LAOS, the Digital Strategy allows schools to take more ownership over developing policies and practices whilst simultaneously providing them with the necessary direction and guidance to plan their next steps in providing quality outcomes and experiences for their school community. The Digital Strategy has facilitated this by outlining good practice on the use of ICT through the Digital Learning Framework which provides quality standards for schools to benchmark their practice against.
    - Engagement with the Digital Framework has been reinforced through revised curricula, such as the Junior Cycle. The flexibility offered through the Framework enables schools and individual teachers to implement a level of ICT with which they are comfortable to support teaching and learning in their contexts.

- **Professional Learning**
    - Overall, schools' engagement in ICT professional learning over the last five years has supported effective engagement with the Digital Strategy. For example, teachers have been supported in their development of digital competencies. This has enabled them to utilise new technologies as effective teaching and learning tools. Upskilling in this area has also helped to increase teachers' appreciation of the how ICT supports their own learning as well as that of students.
    - The wide range of professional development opportunities offered through the PDST, local education centres and across the ETB sector have helped foster an openness to technology across the teaching profession which may not have been as prevalent prior to the publication and implementation of the Digital Strategy. This openness may contribute to teachers ongoing professional learning in this area, which includes engagement in professional dialogue on ICT.
    - The professional development infrastructure in place as a result of the Digital Strategy was invaluable to schools during periods of remote teaching and learning. A great number of schools had already gained greater confidence in this area and all schools were able to receive support and guidance during this period through well-established teams within the PDST and education centres.

- Increasing teacher confidence and competence in ICT, along with the other measures mentioned above, have helped to ensure that technology is no longer an add-on but an essential tool to enhance teaching, learning and assessment.

- **Leadership, Management and Communication**
  - Increasing engagement with ICT across whole school communities through the Digital Strategy has also fostered a greater awareness and appreciation of digital technologies amongst school leaders. In addition to explicitly supporting quality teaching and learning, ICT is now being used as a management and communication tool. This use of ICT has strengthened connections within the school as well as between the school and the wider community.
  - As well as being used as a mechanism for sharing and promoting ongoing work within the school, digital technologies have enabled schools to engage and communicate with parents/guardians in new and engaging ways, which ultimately has a positive impact on teaching, learning and assessment. Such established communication infrastructures were invaluable to many schools during periods of remote teaching and learning. Many schools were able to manage the move to online learning in a relatively quick manner given the circumstances. Where schools required additional support, they were able to source information and training and adapt to the remote learning space. Ultimately, the work done as a result of the Digital Strategy largely contributed to the facilitation of effective teaching, learning and assessment during a very challenging period in Irish education.

2. From your understanding of the current Digital Strategy for Schools 2015-2020 what challenges have school faced in the integration of digital technologies into teaching, learning and assessment practices. (20000 characters)

- **Technical Support, Broadband, Devices, Funding, Managing ICT**
  - Despite significant investment nationally in ICT through the Digital Strategy, many schools still experience challenges with hardware, including broadband and device access. This is particularly true for schools commencing their "digital journey", who were starting from a different baseline and subsequently struggle to make progress when compared with other schools.
  - While a generous funding stream was provided to allow schools to implement the Strategy, funding was not at a level to allow all schools to purchase devices for their teachers. In some cases, schools require students and staff to use or purchase their own devices for school/work. This approach might be considered problematic and inequitable and may warrant further consideration and Departmental Guidance.
  - The COVID context also highlighted challenges experienced by some communities regarding Wi-Fi/broadband access for staff and students at

home. Device access and Wi-Fi is of particular concern for children and families from minority communities and low socio-economic backgrounds. This digital divide is particularly prevalent in DEIS schools. In this context, there may be a need to evaluate and address this increasing gap. With blended learning approaches becoming increasing popular, these challenges may make it difficult for schools to integrate digital skills into their approaches.

- In addition, schools with established ICT systems and a sufficient number of devices continue to experience technical difficulties maintaining and managing these devices. These difficulties include maintaining devices on a day-to-day basis as well as funding sustainability given the ongoing requirement to the upgrade and replacement of devices/systems. In particular, there is concern that funding will not be maintained which will impact on schools' engagement with the Strategy and subsequent integration of ICT with teaching, learning and assessment. A sustainable plan is required to provide funding for a computing device which would be replaced in a three-year cycle.
- In a similar vein, technical support has also been a concern in some contexts, which a few schools have noted has proven to be expensive and haphazard in some cases.
- In addition, school funding may have been directed towards investment in hardware and software over professional development and training through the Strategy. A greater balance might be achieved through the updated Strategy. Guidance in this regard might emphasise that spending should be in line with the needs of the school, and that these needs may require investment in professional learning as well as equipment.

- **Teacher Attitude, Reluctance and Fear**
  - Despite increased awareness and interest in ICT since the release of the Digital Strategy, many schools still experience challenges engaging all members of staff in whole school ICT approaches. The initial challenge of overcoming teacher reluctance to upskill and engage with new technologies remains in a number of schools but has also been compounded in some contexts because of an increasing awareness of data protection and GDPR. Continued reluctance and fear has put some teachers off using features of technologies that would be educationally beneficial.
  - There is also a sense that some teachers avoid integrating ICT into their approaches as a protective measure, ensuring digital technology does not dominate over other approaches.
  - Other challenges include a lack of confidence and competence integrating various approaches to engaging with ICT. This area could be explicitly addressed in the updated Strategy to ensure its full realisation.
  - Teacher reluctance towards ICT could be addressed through the integration of digital technologies in the roll out of national Curriculum Frameworks at

primary and post-primary level. This integrative approach might also mirror the approach encouraged within the strategy itself.

- **Teacher Professional Learning and Guidance**
  - Professional learning opportunities were available to schools to support the implementation of the Digital Strategy. Schools' overall engagement in professional learning has been mostly positive. Approaches to professional learning might be improved in the roll out of the updated strategy to ensure it maintains a continuous element, is accessible to schools, engages school leaders and is responsive to other, ongoing developments in schools. For example, the national PDST in Technology was engaged to support the 'Digital Learning Planning Framework' with support events for Digital Leaders. These sessions were very helpful to schools, but it was felt that these opportunities lacked a continuous support element.
  - In addition, these sessions would benefit from mandatory school leader attendance. These sessions were generally attended by school Digital Leaders who are often allocated many roles within a school, as well as managing a full teaching timetable. Any future 'Digital Learning' planning should engage with senior school leaders and digital leaders to ensure sustainable and meaningful implementation of the next Strategy.
  - Similar approaches were adopted within the ETB sector where the responsibility for ICT was designated to a key person who often led out on digital planning and supported staff with integrating digital tools within their practice. In some cases, this individual was frequently leading the Computer Science Department and planning towards rolling out Leaving Certificate Computer Science. Although opportunities may have been facilitated for these individuals locally through Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), a greater emphasis on distributed leadership in the updated Strategy would be welcome.
  - It was also felt that teachers' professional development and engagement with the Strategy was impacted by the publication of key guidance documents, including the Digital Learning Framework, after the publication of the Digital Strategy itself. To have maximum impact, any future planning supports must be in line with strategy roll-outs.
  - Furthermore, some schools were challenged by a lack of support materials/guidance around the statements of effective/highly effective practice. The Framework would benefit from being accompanied by a set of clear, tangible descriptors of actions and approaches schools might take following their identification of targets. Furthermore, it was felt that although the 'Digital Learning Framework' provided guidance in relation to planning, these supports were enacted too late to fully support the Strategy.

- **Time**
    - Time allocation for professional development and collaboration has also posed challenges to the integration of ICT with teaching, learning and assessment. A sense of initiative overload has been felt by schools which may have limited the impact of ICT professional learning opportunities. For example, schools have experienced challenges allocating time for training on the overall framework as well as the subsequent pedagogical approaches required to fully realise their targets.
    - The time constraints felt by schools have also been compounded by a need to keep up to speed with fast changes in technology, specifically software. This has been particularly challenging where schools have focused on upskilling teachers' competency and confidence integrating apps etc.
    - Time constraints have also resulted in limited opportunities for collaboration, dialogue and meaningful reflection amongst staff on progress to date which are essential elements of professional learning and development.
    - Time was a particular challenge for those charged with leading the integration of digital technologies in teaching, learning and assessment. Locally, these coordinators required increased hours set aside on their timetable to provide support for schools' digital integration which warrants further consideration in the context of the update Strategy.
    - Although excellent training was provided by PDST Technology in Education and as well as internally within schools, extracting teachers from class to participate in training is difficult due to the lack of substitution. Further training and support would be welcome here.
    - Locating information and resources was also considered quite time consuming by some schools. The collation of professional development and other resources might be considered through the development of the updated Strategy.
    - Schools who struggled to identify a Digital Leader/Digital Team may also have required additional time to engage an external "expert" to support their identification of a specific technology/platform.

- **Existing Curricula**
    - In some cases, existing curricula and guidelines have limited the impact of the Digital Strategy in schools. Specifically, there is an inherent mismatch between statements of effective/highly effective practice within the Framework, which are heavily influenced by teaching methods which do not align with the style of assessments put forward by the SEC for Junior Cycle and Senior Cycle. In particular, assessment at senior cycle is predominately paper based, which encourages use of methodologies which facilitate achievement in this mode. This has resulted in low uptake and buy-in from staff members and presents a significant challenge going forward.
    - Computer Science was introduced at post-primary level as part of the Strategy, the implementation of which has posed challenges to some

schools. Further work in terms of teacher support and development of resources needs to be done in this area.

- **ICT Post COVID-19**
    - Most recently, one of the biggest challenges many schools have faced involves the perceived weariness with technology following the full return to school. This weariness may pose challenges in the adoption of a blended learning model going forward. In this regard, the new Digital Strategy must be considerate of the most appropriate mechanisms and approaches for maintaining the ICT gains which have occurred during periods of remote teaching and learning. This will ensure that digital learning plays a pivotal role in the teaching, learning and assessment process going forward and becomes a central tenet of children and students' education journey.

3. Your comments and observations on the key areas and priorities that should be addressed in the development of the new Digital Strategy for Schools. (20000 characters)

- **Curriculum Support/Teaching, Learning and Assessment**
    - There has been great progress in the adoption and integration of technology in teaching and learning throughout and since the lifetime of the Digital Strategy for Schools 2015-2020. However, this needs to now include assessment using technology as there is fantastic potential to use technology in assessing learning and development.
    - There is a need for more robust models for integrating technology into classroom practice and student learning in the post-pandemic world. The primary focus should be on teaching and learning. The new strategy should be based around the teacher within the classroom and how they use technology to enhance teaching and learning. It should also involve students, in terms of what the best fit is for the cohort of young people within the school.
    - Supporting curriculum needs should be at the heart of the digital strategy. While the Junior Cycle Key Skills place emphasis on digital skills, further supports are needed to achieve this in practical terms. The Junior Cycle class-based assessments are a good example of where practical interventions are needed to realise the full benefits of this model.
    - Similarly, "Being a Digital Learner" has been introduced as a Key Competency through the Draft Primary Curriculum Framework. To fully support the realisation of this aspect of the Framework, guidance on integrating digital technology and teaching digital skills will be required in the roll out of each curriculum area at primary level.
    - The new strategy needs to connect and link with the new and current curriculum. Ensure that subject departments within schools are supported to embrace technology as part of their subject area i.e., the mantra of 'transferable' technology becoming the 'norm.'

- It should place greater emphasis on the integration of digital technology with teaching, learning and assessment and practical support for schools in this area.
- Greater emphasis on use of digital portfolios with reference to assessment of same would enhance the student experience in terms of developing their digital skills. National TY project-based learning with a focus on digital learning could be rolled out, encouraging learners to develop skills that are captured in the form of a Digital Passport/Badging system.
- The benefits of digital learning need to be clearly articulated in the new strategy. Very often, technology is used in the classroom for the sake of it rather than realising and achieving the educational benefits of digital learning tools.
- The Selfie tool is an excellent tool and the fact that it is a ready-made report is a powerful addition to a school. More direct alignment to the teaching and learning practices within that would be useful. As that tool is built on the digital competence framework it would streamline the work. A recommendation could be to start with that and layer LAOS onto it rather than the other way round.
- There is a need for far greater focus and attention to be given to effective assessment strategies using technology, workflows that enable meaningful learning intentions and outcomes. Greater practical support on the various digital modes of assessment would lead to greater efficacy among teachers and in turn benefit their students.
- Further exploration of the school curriculum should include additional digital-based programmes for the forthcoming Senior Cycle review. Very often, digital skills gained at Junior Cycle are parked for more traditional modes of teaching and learning. Progression of skills development should be evident at senior cycle level. Similarly, facilitating the "digital transition" from primary to post primary will be another important consideration in the development of the Draft Primary Curriculum Framework and relevant support materials for primary and Junior Cycle.
- To further support teachers to develop resources to enhance the learning journey of the student, the strategy should place a focus on content creation and the use of digital technology to develop resources. Teachers need guidance around the practice of effective resource creation and a movement away from an over-reliance on textbooks.
- Modes of assessment dictate approaches to teaching and learning. The new Digital Strategy should outline actions to review our current approaches to assessment (in conjunction with Senior Cycle Review currently underway) and suggest the inclusion of assessment of digital content created by learners for final exams (e.g., Digital Portfolios as stated previously)
- Creativity in curriculum should be a greater focus of the new digital strategy. Over-reliance on traditional methods hinder the creativity of those students who would otherwise excel under alternative conditions.

- Teacher and student voice should also be considered in the context of the Strategy.

- **Technical Support**
  - There is a need more than ever to support Digital Leaders within schools as an essential element of fostering digital teaching and learning. Sustaining the use of technology post-COVID needs much consideration. Local Digital Leaders have limited time and resources at their disposal. There is an immediate demand for schools to have a full-time Digital Learning resource available to support Digital Learning. This resource would support teaching, learning, and assessment alongside technical support.
  - Alongside the school Digital Leader, an in-school or shared technical support person could be recruited through an apprenticeship scheme to support schools, which would provide local level technical support as required. ETB schools are well placed to consider this as a viable option of further support.
  - Many schools are spending and planning in relation to technology and Digital Learning without relevant expertise and knowledge. Schools require bespoke expertise such as the support provided within the central ETB structure to ensure that the use of technology is achieving the desired impact. Schools working in isolation lose the benefit of learning from others and risk replicating mistakes that have been experienced outside of their context. A streamlined and clustered approach for both technical issues and digital learning from industry experts could result in greater impact for all involved.
  - Consideration should be given to the deployment of a digital technician to support clusters of small schools in addition to the Digital Leader. The requirement for support is beyond the expectation of a post of responsibility holder both in terms of expertise and time is hugely important. Dedicated, technical ICT support for local school clusters and centralised digital support team providing CPD for the cluster model could be extended to schools in local clusters.

- **Digital Learning Planning**
  - School principals should have a fundamental role as part of the broader school context and they will need to ensure that what is being proposed aligns with the school's development plan and the school's current priorities. Supports for school leaders in this regard should be an essential component of the new digital strategy.
  - The ETB sector would welcome further opportunity engage with national stakeholders to explore to explore supports for their schools in relation to funding and strategic thinking which directly aligns with organisational and local level planning.
  - The previous digital strategy was text-heavy and cumbersome in terms of the level of standards. Going forward, a recommendation would be to reduce the number of 'Standards' on school's Digital Learning Strategy – keeping them

clear and concise for staff, thus empowering schools to achieve goals effectively.

- A balance of constructivist-based approaches with direct/explicit instruction approaches should be a core element of the strategy.
- A clear outline of the resources that will be available over the coming 5 years would assist schools and Education and Training Boards in prioritising their requirements.
- A consideration for 21st Century learning spaces within the new strategy would align with current research and findings, such as Professor Stephen Heppell https://www.heppell.net, in relation to environments that are most conducive to positive learning outcomes. Outdoor and alternative learning spaces should include technology and technical infrastructure that ensures learning is personalised to the needs of every learner.
- The Department of Education's building regulations and Technical Guidance Documents should be aligned with the development of learning spaces that meet the needs of learners.
- The strategy should focus on medium-term goals in post-pandemic era, recognising emerging practices that should be strengthened going forward, weeding out ineffective uses of technology and giving clarity as to how students and teachers can function best.

- **Skills/ Professional Learning/Teacher Competence**
  - Teacher upskilling and a focus on teacher digital competence should be a core focus of the digital strategy.
  - The work of PDST Technology in Education has been excellent in supporting schools. A recommendation for PDST (or other) to provide whole-school training to staff - mandatory – using a cluster model with school closures, like the JCT Cluster days would be most welcome. This could be completed at least once every 2 years.
  - Teachers require more advice and guidance on using technology effectively and streamlining training and sharing of best practice will benefit both staff and students.
  - All stakeholders would benefit from looking at TPACK & SAMR models to help with effective planning on the use of technology supported with supports that explain/demonstrate effective use of technology in learning. These elements could be integrated into the digital strategy for the benefit of all schools.
  - Allocating training time to ensure teachers are confident with using the tools (especially important when thinking about operations, where staff are potentially required to work in different locations).
  - We need to consider carefully that digital skills are used where they enhance the learning - not just a digital textbook or not being used for the sake of it. This should be reflected in the digital strategy.

- CPD should be more focused on strategic goals, and the Teaching and Learning agenda, e.g., flipped classroom, sharing learning intention, using success criteria, providing feedback and reporting to students and parents.
- Digital Media literacy should be seen as an integral competency for all students, and an integral part of being literate. Unfortunately, this is currently not the case.
- The UNESCO ICT Competency Framework states: "Successful integration of ICT into teaching and learning requires rethinking the role of teachers in planning and applying ICT to enhance and transform learning. Education systems need to regularly update and reform teacher preparation and professional development according, ensuring that all teachers can harness technology for education." There needs to be a larger focus on the role of individual teachers in the new Strategy - too much of the focus of the last plan was on Theme 4, and we need to move to focus more on Themes 1 and 2 - Theme 1: Teaching, Learning and Assessment Using ICT; Theme 2: Teacher Professional Learning
- There is an appetite within schools and among their teachers to ensure that their level of expertise in ICT continues to grow. It would be vitally important that this is maintained now that the Junior Cycle is embedded and before the Senior Cycle reform begins as well as alongside the development of the Draft Primary Curriculum Framework.
- Training/certification for preservice teachers in technology should also be a priority going forward at primary and post-primary level within the Strategy. This could be reinforced through the revision of the CÉIM Standards from the Teaching Council later this year. Certification for teachers engaging in professional learning in ICT might also be considered within the context of the Strategy.

4. Please provide below any other comments and observations you wish to make on the development of a new Digital Strategy for Schools. (20000 characters)

- **Connectivity and access to devices/Funding of resources**
  - The funding to date has been most welcome and has ensured that ETBs could also manage continuity of teaching and learning during emergency remote teaching and learning during the pandemic. ETBs need to have a clear strategy/roadmap for ICT in their schools. This should be done in collaboration with and not in isolation from the schools. Funding to schools should, therefore, match previous years to continue the development of digital progression within schools.
  - All staff should be provided with devices such as Surface Pro's or iPad Pro's (depending on school). Due to GDPR, it is unacceptable to expect teaching staff to use their own devices for school business. School closures also require that teachers need access to devices that can be used in the school but also at home.

- Balancing the opportunities for all learners on issues such as broadband in the home, device availability and technical support needs to be addressed in the new digital strategy.
- A refocus on the centralised space for resources which should include detailed SEN resources and exemplars of good practice, would be efficient and effective for teachers/schools.
- Building of online networks between schools for resource and expertise sharing should be recommended in the new digital strategy with a recommended model included for use by schools.
- Large school buildings with declining student enrolment do not get sufficient funding to impact their digital strategy in any meaningful way. The funding they receive would not fund a viable WIFI network or sufficient devices to initiate widescale implementation of the strategy.
- The issue of devices for students should be addressed in the new digital strategy. Are parentally funded devices a realistic option? Is there equity across our education system with a 'parentally' funded device option in place? Access to devices for some schools and parents would provide greater equity and address the 'digital poverty gap' among learners across all contexts. It would identify Ireland as a world digital leader.
- It is important that funding continues on an annual basis to keep momentum going and to ensure up-to-date equipment at all times. As stated previously, continuing professional learning for staff should be provided particularly now that schools move towards incorporating post-holders with responsibility for Digital Learning as a core part of the Middle-management team at post-primary level.
- As technology changes so frequently, there needs to be a commitment to upgrade devices and equipment in schools. The option of a lease scheme needs to be available to ETBs - from a budgeting perspective, an outlay of a smaller amount each year, rather than one lump sum every 5 years would ensure steady development of internal strategic plans.
- Increased funding to provide teaching staff with devices will enhance teaching, learning and assessment. Given that there are more opportunities for blended learning, it is important to ensure that teachers have the tools to create and distribute resources effectively – and that students can return their work just as easily. Choosing the right technology can streamline this process and prevent an unnecessary extra burden for teachers.
- Significant increase in funding for DEIS schools should be prioritised in the Strategy. Weaknesses in the system became particularly apparent in DEIS schools during COVID-19 and the issue of equality, equity and access were highlighted on a number of levels.

- **Links to School Self-Evaluation Process**
  - The new Digital Strategy should link in with a school's School Self-Evaluation plan to promote a whole school approach to digital teaching and learning.

- Using LAOS model, more quantitative evidence for initiatives implemented may be gathered to show how effective the school's Digital Strategy is.
- A link between the domains of 'Teaching & Learning' and 'Leadership & Management' should be evident in the new digital strategy for schools. In this way, there is clarity around the roles of teachers, middle management and senior management.
- The strategy should emphasise clearly defined actions that schools can implement to achieve highly effective practice outcomes.

- **GDPR and Data Protection Issues/Online safety**
  - Schools need clear guidance on data protection and GDPR issues and clear instructions or supports around this should be evident from the new strategy.
  - More focus is needed on security and safety for students with their online presence. Engagement with external supports and planning for and embedding internal supports would help schools and student welfare. There needs to be greater promotion of Webwise amongst students, teachers and parents/guardians.
  - A useful focus within the strategy could include how, as a school, technology can be used to promote digital wellbeing. Clear guidance should be evident within the strategy.
  - Earnest consideration should be given to being GDPR compliant while also encouraging exploration of emerging technologies in schools. Fear of data management is a concern for schools and teachers. More supports are needed in this area.

- **Administrative role of Technology**
  - Schools should be encouraged to plan using technological tools to enhance administration tasks. COVID-19 has demonstrated that administrative and teaching staff can engage in 'One Platform' solutions such as Microsoft Teams, Google Workspace etc. This can create professional learning opportunities for all. Guidance on how to effectively engage with parents/guardians, new staff, Boards of Management, etc. for meetings, information evenings etc. would greatly enhance efficiency within school administration. Use of virtual platforms for the above is relatively new for schools and guidance within the strategy would be welcome.

- **Observations from ETB Further Education and Training perspective**
  - The FET ETB sector welcomes the development of a new digital strategy for schools and as a first destination for a substantial number of school leavers, also welcomes the opportunity to participate in the consultation process.
  - The sector rejects the digital native narrative. It is true that today's learners have grown-up in a digital world where the Internet is a public utility, but it is possible for young people to be digitally excluded through not having access

to ICT devices or reliable Internet access – especially in rural areas and or disadvantaged areas. A learner's aptitude for technology is more likely to be a product of breadth of use, experience and education, rather than through simply living in a digital world.

- The ETB FET sector notes that many learners entering FET, although in possession of smartphones and other devices, are often passive users of ICT, adept at navigating social media, but struggling with collaborative applications and learning oriented ICT applications and uses. ICT is embraced for personal use but less so for education and work-oriented use.
- The sector feels that learners entering FET should have basic foundational knowledge in the Office suite - Word, Excel and PowerPoint and understand the uses and power of each application. In addition, learners should have a basic understanding of other IT basics, such as file management, printing, communications, cloud computing and storage and have some level of cyber threat awareness.
- The sector notes a mixed level of confidence - with using and engaging with ICT - in learners entering the FET sector. The COVID-19 epidemic has forced an increased level of engagement- though perhaps not confidence in using ICT. It is also noted that there is often no relationship between confidence and skill level.
- Another aspect of use of ICT is critical thinking. As mentioned above, it is observed that learners are passive; they do not generally question the accuracy of information found online. The last five years and the rise of "fake news" illustrate it is not sufficient for citizens to be competent users of technology, but also critical users of technology. It is imperative that to be able to fully engage in civil society, citizens must be digitally literate with good information literacy and critical thinking skills. In Finland media and information literacy and the development of critical thinking skills have been embedded into the state secondary school curriculum and consideration should be given to the doing similar in Ireland when the opportunity to do so arises.
- **Recommendations:**
  Learners existing ICT skills should be benchmarked against an existing framework such as DigComp, the EU's digital competence framework for citizens. Gaps in knowledge can be identified and filled.
- Schools should make ICT more relevant to learner's education through more integration in learning activities such as projects and homework. It is not sufficient to make technology available for use, proper training in use of classroom technology must be provided. "Sink or swim" is not a good strategy and has the potential to alienate many learners. Many schools use Microsoft or Google and there are of training resources - and trainers - readily available. Bespoke courses should be constructed taking benchmarked skill levels into account.

- In Transition Year, students are not engaging with the Junior or Leaving Certificate curricula and therefore, this year is ideal to spend more time embracing and developing ICT skills. It is therefore suggested that Transition Year should include an ICT programme that could borrow or incorporate material from the likes of *Lisbon City Council's Digital Skills Passport*, which seeks to demystify the use of technology, or UCC's Digital Passport, which shows how technology can enhance students' learning. Another option is the Microsoft Office Specialist (MOS) certification which, while there is a cost associated, would provide learners with a globally recognised industry award. In lieu of embedding digital literacy into the curriculum, there is opportunity perhaps to collaborate with Media Literacy Ireland, creators of the *Be Media Smart* campaign, or other agencies to develop a critical thinking course for transition year students.
- ICT devices should be made available to learners in a loan agreement format, similar in nature to the devices provided in 2020 to FET Disadvantaged learners.
- That equipment in Schools and Centres is kept up to date and in line with best international practice that will facilitate the highest possible outcomes in a teaching and learning environment.

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