

**Teachers’ Union of Ireland (TUI) response to the invitation of the**

**Department of Education to make a submission on the topic of “*Digital Strategy in Schools”.***

**(May 2021)**

**Introduction**

The TUI represents teachers, lecturers and staff (19,000+) in Education and Training Boards (ETBs), voluntary secondary schools, Community and Comprehensive (C&C) schools, Youthreach, institutes of technology and technological universities and those working in out of school services.

Investment in Information and Communications Technology (hardware, software and infrastructure) has long been inadequate. The Covid pandemic has highlighted this but also the need to address the digital divide and the equity issues arising, as well as the need to provide CPD to teachers within work time.

**Background**

Ireland has an internationally acknowledged, high-performing education system and a respected teaching profession (Teaching Council, 2010; OECD, 2013; DES, 2018a; OECD, 2015a; NAPD, 2016; Comhairle na nOg, 2017; Growing Up in Ireland, 2017; IPSOS MRBI Trust in the Professions Survey, 2017; Boyle, 2017; Boyle, 2019; Scanlon & McKenna, 2018; EU Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2018; Kantar Millward Brown, 2018; EU Commission, 2018; EU Commission, 2019a; EU Commission, 2019b; Social Progress Initiative, 2018; United Nations Development Programme, 2018, Irish Survey of Student Engagement 2018; HEA, 2019; Coolahan, 2017; Eivers, 2019; CSO, 2019; McKeown et al., 2019; CSO, 2020; OECD, 2020; Eurofound, 2020; McNamara et al., 2020; Clark & Kavanagh, 2021) despite spending relatively little on education (OECD, 2015b; SJI, 2018, NERI, 2018, OECD, 2019a; UNDP, 2019) and experiencing historic underinvestment (DES, 2018b). Indeed, citizen satisfaction with the education system in Ireland is the highest of any of 22 European countries studied by Boyle (2018) whilst parent satisfaction with the Irish education system was the second highest out of fifty-six countries in Clerkin et al. (2020).

It is also worthwhile noting that 2019 data (OECD, 2019b) shows that both citizen satisfaction with the education system, and the economic return to the taxpayer of investment in education, are both extraordinarily high in Ireland compared to international norms. An Ipsos MRBI survey in 2019 found extraordinarily high levels of public trust in teachers, much higher than for journalists, Gardai, civil servants, politicians, business leaders, social media influencers, bankers or even the “ordinary person in the street” (Irish Times January 31st, 2019). ESRI (2020) found very high levels of trust of young people in the Irish education system.

Ireland has a very young population (Eurostat, 2015; Government of Ireland, 2019; DCYA, 2020). In 2008, we had the second highest proportion of 10–14-year-olds in the European Union (CSO, 2009). The high birth rate in Ireland (CSO, 2017; Eurostat, 2017; Government of Ireland, 2019) indicates that the population of young people is likely to remain high for the foreseeable future. The DES (2012, 2017) suggests that the number of students in the primary school system will rise by forty-nine thousand (516,460 to 565,696) from 2011 to 2019 and by almost one hundred thousand in second level between 2011 and 2025 (322,528 to 416,897). The latest projections are that numbers in post-primary will peak at 402,000-410,000 in 2024/25 (Government of Ireland, 2020; DE, 2020a). In this context, it is not sufficient to suggest that a world-class child centred society can be achieved with inadequate resources of time, money or personnel.

**Digital Strategy Generally**

The TUI is on record as welcoming the previous iteration of the Digital Strategy for Schools 2015-2020. However, the TUI made clear then, as it does now, that substantial investment is necessary in ICT in schools. The €210m over five years in the last strategy was inadequate even by 2015 standards. It did not come close to even dealing with historic underinvestment in hardware, software, CPD, licensing needs etc in schools. Given the extent and pace of developments in technology, constant revision and renewal of the government’s strategy, priorities and investment is critical to enabling teaching and learning for 21st century skills and competences. The digital divide for students and teachers especially in DEIS schools, and the poor standard of broadband in many rural areas was clearly exposed by Covid-related disruption to in-class teaching in schools. A quantum jump in investment is now needed.

**Covid**

All Irish society is acutely conscious of the impact of Covid and its attendant losses in life, health, and employment. We must guard against losses in the social and cultural fabric that binds our nation together. In which connection, the work of TUI members, both in education and as trade unionists, is vital. Indeed, the crisis highlights the centrality of public service and collective effort to any well-ordered society. The TUI earnestly hopes that those newly awakened to this reality do not soon forget it. For our part, we pay tribute and thanks to fellow public servants, in healthcare, policing and education most particularly, and indeed to all workers engaged in the provision of essential services. TUI members have risen magnificently to the challenge of maintaining education of the highest standard. Education is our greatest equalising and unifying endeavour and in the face of enormous difficulties our members have continued to inspire curiosity and imagination, to release potential and to unfold opportunities and possibilities. The TUI will beware of any complacent, or indeed malign, assumption by Managements or Government that the extraordinary efforts made by school staff in response to the emergency form a template for future work. We will ensure that our no-precedent stipulations, and the written assurances from Government, Departments and Managements to the same effect, will be honoured. Emergency remote teaching and learning (ERTL) was indeed only an emergency measure. This has been acknowledged by the Minister for Education in her address to TUI Congress in April 2021.

**Importance of ICT**

The TUI envisions a greater integration of ICT into teaching and learning across the curriculum. This comprehends ICT as a basic teaching and learning tool interchangeable with a host of other tools, as a research and experiential tool for teachers and students and as a sophisticated teaching tool to support, with ease, engagement, creativity and imagination in classrooms. It is important that the issues of software, hardware and infrastructure are all addressed in the context of both costs and workload.

School spaces and organisation should be more cognizant of how ICT can support teaching and learning and promote different teaching approaches e.g., team teaching, integrated projects, independent learning.

Teacher competence to use ICT equipment, mediums and resources as a normal, everyday part of teaching and learning should, in general, have reached an advanced level. On-going development and renewal opportunities should be available - cost neutral to teachers – to ensure they can embrace, with ease, new ICT developments and resources. If neglected or underdeveloped teacher competence will inhibit potential development.

In tandem, student competence to use ICT mediums and devices should be well developed. In this regard every student should have access to direct tuition. It is not enough to assume that students are digital natives and therefore do not need a basic foundation in ICT related skills – evidence is emerging that students are often limited in how, and for what purpose, they engage with ICT.

ICT provides the opportunity:

* to make knowledge and ideas more accessible
* to introduce interactive, visual, stimulating mediums
* for teachers and students to access a wider range of knowledge and ideas and to
* for teachers and students to network to share ideas and information and learn from each other
* to promote project and integrated learning
* to develop student research skills
* to promote independent and group learning
* to promote and develop effective 21st century skills among students.

**Priorities for schools in relation to ICT**

Priorities must include:

* Building and strengthening teacher expertise and competence.
* Ensuring adequate teacher and student access to essential infrastructure.
* Accessing, developing and managing software which will involve a mix of external agencies, teachers and student (relative to context).
* Ensuring safe access and ethical, appropriate use of ICT by teachers and students.
* Planning for and providing adequate technical support at local/school/classroom/ individual teacher level in a manner that guarantees appropriate and timely support and ensures teachers are not distracted from their core function as facilitator of learning.
* Organisation and/or re-organisation of learning spaces and time in a manner that embraces, more fully, the potential of ICT to support and enhance the teaching and learning process.

The above will only be obtainable if there is adequate investment by government at school and system level.

**Challenges for ICT implementation in schools**

The essential challenges are:

* Ensuring a minimum level of access to and use of ICT in all schools and classrooms. This includes accessing the right expertise, building capacity and maintaining and developing that capacity on an on-going basis. Capacity here includes infrastructural capacity, human capacity (student, teacher) and resource capacity (teaching resources, technical support etc.)
* Keeping abreast with how and what is evolving in ICT and remain responsive to changes. The speed at which new devices, mediums, packages are developed requires on-going renewal and development. This infers on-going high-level investment in ICT – very challenging in an environment of in a time of budgetary constraints.
* Accessing adequate time, expertise and resources to respond to ICT developments and incorporate them in a timely manner into teaching and learning and school life.
* Supporting students to ‘stay on task’ and continue to maintain positive relationships with other students in a context of some organisations pushing schools to develop ‘bring your own device’ mechanisms. Such BYOD policies may reduce some pressure on schools in terms of financing but create an inequitable structure in terms of families who can, and families who can’t afford devices. It also creates a security and insurance headache for schools. For example, cyberbullying could become a problem as schools don’t own the device so can’t install internet security software on the device. The TUI has recently addressed this issue in a submission to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (TUI, 2021).

Fairness means meaningful access to ICT for all schools and students and a level of investment that:

* ensures all schools have a minimum level of ICT infrastructure, hardware, equipment and devices, relevant software and materials at whole-school, classroom, teacher and student level
* provides, as necessary, for additional grants to schools to reach and/or maintain a minimum level in respect of the point above; such grants must be renewable given the pace at which ICT is evolving
* supports appropriate, on-going access for teachers to up-skilling and development on evolving ICT mediums and materials
* makes provision for financial incentives and supports to ensure teachers and students and their families can purchase and maintain the necessary equipment, devices and materials
* makes adequate and meaningful provision for access to technical expertise and support for schools and teachers
* enables schools put in place a co-ordinator (more than one in a large school) to drive and sustain development.
* access to high-speed broadband must be consistent across the school
* wireless systems will be critical to supporting general engagement with ICT throughout schools, building general capacity and promoting the use of flexible learning hubs or spaces, group-based activity and independent study
* connectivity to a wireless network throughout a school (each classroom, the library and general areas etc.) will be essential to enabling effective integration and use of ICT in teaching in learning across the curriculum.

**Equipment and Devices**

Given the pace of technological advances there is now enormous variety in the type, nature and range of ICT equipment and digital devices that schools can select. Access to devices and equipment that support teaching and learning operates at a number of levels:

* the school level i.e., what should be available to some and all classrooms and other learning areas
* the teacher level i.e., what is appropriate for individual subject teachers and for all teachers
* the student level i.e., what devices and resources are appropriate and necessary depending on age, level, subject area etc.

The management, review and upgrading of systems, devices and equipment can add further layers of complexity to day-to-day operation in schools. Particular areas of concern include:

* *Storage of data and security* - ‘Cloud’ is now commonly advanced as a solution to the effective management of these issues but much has to be explored and tested in this regard.
* *Expert advice* - School management and staffs need access to expert advice on a wide number of issues including balancing financial management with good decisions about educational needs and day-to-day operation.
* *Technical support* – School staffs will also need access to appropriate technical support and internal co-ordination to ensure effective development and smooth operation daily.

**Broadband**

It is vitally important that high quality and reliable broadband services be available to communities throughout the State. It is grossly inequitable that schools and students in some parts of the country cannot access reasonably priced, reliable broadband services. Provision of such requires a State-owned broadband provider.

**Technical and Development Support**

Schools and teachers need support to manage technology effectively and efficiently for educational and administrative functions. In this regard the TUI notes that:

* Access to technical support, experts and specialists will be crucial
* The level of support required will depend on the nature and extent of the issue to be addressed and resolved
* Support must be appropriate, responsive and timely
* A blend of on-line and face-to-face support and access to on-site and off-site specialists will be necessary
* As with broadband, connectivity and equipment issues specific, additional budgets must be made available to schools to meet technical support costs.

The TUI advocates that local businesses with adequate expertise and capacity be eligible to complete installation work and provide technical support to schools as this builds local relationships which are often invaluable. However, external support and guidance should be available to schools in managing procurements, tenders, selection, installation, upgrading etc. It is important to note that local business often provide ancillary supports to schools that cannot be part of a tender process e.g. providing work experience to students, or sponsoring prizes for fetes and festivals.

The TUI considers that ICT advisors at school level must be re-instated. Like many curriculum and pedagogical initiatives, the development and promotion of technology in teaching and learning will be best served by an ambassador (more than one in larger schools). Such a person would dedicate specific expertise and time to developing and building other teachers’ capacity in their independent and shared endeavours. The decision in 2008 to discontinue ICT advisors was short sighted. It should be reversed, especially in the context of the significant reduction in middle management posts in schools since 2008. Recent changes in middle management posts (Circular 3/2018, 23/2021) are just a very small step in restoring support. However, a much larger move in terms of restoration of both is also needed. Day-to-day on-site guidance and development support is important to grow capacity within schools among staffs. Someone (or more depending on school size) needs to have dedicated time on a day-to-day basis to focus on sustaining development, bringing new ideas to attention of staff and supporting the general integration of ICT in schools on an on-going basis.

**Teacher Professional Learning and Development**

Classrooms, and the student learning and development therein, are about building and enhancing relationships, attitudes, understandings and perspectives; computers, digital and online devices, tools and programmes are not equipped to do this profoundly human work. ERTL has clearly shown that the teacher is the essential factor in teaching. Technology is the tool to facilitate that, whether in-person or remotely, but the teacher is irreplaceable. Responsibility for the essence of what is going on in schools and classroom rests in the hands, hearts and mind of the school staff, especially the classroom teacher; a role that can never be replaced by even the best technology.

Technology is but another tool to aid teaching and learning. Albeit important, it should not completely displace other teaching aids and tools - quite the contrary, technology should complement and enhance other teaching supports and the teachers’ expertise to varying degrees depending on the context, emphasis and content etc. The important thing is that teachers are supported in understanding, accessing and using ICT as one of many tools in the teaching and learning process and managing it well. The TUI considers that:

* Teachers need on-going access to timely and responsive professional learning and development opportunities as ICT and digital mediums evolve.
* A mix of basic and advanced courses and associated resources will always be necessary; ICT is ever evolving (with speed!) and teachers will come to the learning at various stages of development and with various levels of prior knowledge and understanding.
* While there will be a strong focus on the ICT media or digital devices and their capabilities there must also be a strong and appropriate focus on curriculum, pedagogical and assessment practices.
* A minimum level of courses, seminars, materials and equipment must be available, cost neutral, to individual teachers and schools. Some teachers may commit to further engagement depending on interest and relevance.
* Courses must be accessible in terms of timing, time involved and location. There must not be pressure on teachers to attend CPD which is held outside of traditional working hours.
* A blend of on-line and face-to-face approaches will be important – appropriateness will be dictated by a number of factors e.g., themes, prior knowledge, time available.
* Off-site opportunities will be important to encourage wider face-to face networking and exchange of practice and ideas. On-site opportunities will enable whole-school collaboration and development and lead to internal efficiencies at school level.
* The principal teacher should have flexibility in enabling teachers to pursue off-site learning programmes and seminars and supporting whole-school or subject department activities.

**Workload**

Across all sectors of the education system, years of under-resourcing and under-staffing have resulted in unsustainable workloads, only added to by unnecessary and burdensome bureaucratic distractions from the central activities of teaching and learning. The TUI will not allow anyone to use Covid, or indeed the implementation of new ICT systems/processes/procedures as an excuse to increase our members’ already unsustainable workload.

**TUI Survey Results**

In April 2021 the TUI carried out a survey of over one thousand of its second-level teacher members. The key findings were:

* A staggering 93% of respondents reported disengagement by students during the period of ERTL.
* 76% of respondents believed that ERTL had a disproportionately negative effect on students from disadvantaged backgrounds.
* 64% of respondents found that ERTL took much more time than face-to-face delivery.
* 74% of respondents stated that some of their students were unable to engage with

ERTL as a result of not having access to appropriate electronic devices.

**Middle Management**

The depletion of middle management posts in our schools since 2009 has been very corrosive. It has resulted in a reduction of supports to vulnerable students. The axing of large numbers of posts coincided with an increased demand for supports for students.

In 2018 and 2021 the number of posts was partially restored but only to a level of half of that pertaining prior to the cuts. The minimal restoration in 2018 was described by the DES at the time as partial and a commencement. It is still partial in 2021.

**Recommendations**

The TUI would like to make the following recommendations to the DE:

* It is essential that vital support structures, such as middle management posts, within schools be restored.
* Significant investment is needed in school supports such as ICT infrastructure, availability of software licences, publicly owned rural broadband.
* Appropriate training and resources need to be put in place for all the school community including the Board of Management.
* Availability of ICT advisors and coordinators.
* Multi-annual, substantial funding to address historic underinvestment in ICT.
* There must be recognition that ERTL was an emergency response to a pandemic and that many students, especially in DEIS schools, were further disadvantaged by it despite the best efforts of schools.
* The ‘digital divide’ continues and must be addressed.
* Schools require access to timely technical support.
* HSCLs should be employed in all schools, not just DEIS schools, to support the link between schoolwork and home environment.

**Ends**

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**Glossary**

BYOD Bring Your Own Device

C&C Community and Comprehensive

CPD Continuing Professional Development

CSO Central Statistics Office

DCYA Department of Children and Youth Affairs (Now DCEDIYA)

DE Department of Education

DEIS Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools

DES Department of Education and Skills (Now DE)

ERTL Emergency Remote Teaching and Learning

ESRI Economic and Social Research Institute

ETB Education and Training Board

EU European Union

HEA Higher Education Authority

HSCL Home School Community Liaison

ICT Information and Communications Technology

NAPD National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals

NERI Nevin Economic Research Institute

OECD Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

SJI Social Justice Ireland

TUI Teachers’ Union of Ireland

UNDP United Nations Development Programme

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