Open Call for Submissions on the Development of the

new Digital Strategy for Schools

The Department of Education is consulting with stakeholders on a new Digital Strategy for Schools, and your input is invited.

Background: Digital Strategy 2015-2020

The existing Digital Strategy for Schools, 2015-2020[1], sets out the Department of Education's current policy on the use of digital technologies in teaching, learning and assessment**.** The vision of the Digital Strategy is to "*realise the potential of digital technologies to enhance teaching, learning and assessment so that Ireland's young people become engaged thinkers, active learners, knowledge constructors and global citizens to participate fully in society and the economy".* The strategy promotes the embedding of digital technologies in all classroom and school activity so that the use of digital technology becomes a seamless part of the whole education experience. It underpins the development of 21st Century skills in our young people; skills such as communication and collaboration, critical thinking and analytic reasoning, research skills, creativity, problem solving and team work.

A significant amount has been achieved under the existing strategy and its four themes: teaching, learning and assessment using ICT; teacher professional learning; leadership, research and policy; and ICT infrastructure.

The strategy was underpinned by a €210 million investment by way of an Infrastructure Grant for schools, which has been delivered in full since 2016. The implementation of the strategy in schools is supported by a Digital Learning Framework (DLF) and comprehensive

digital learning planning guidelines and extensive CPD, resources and supports for teachers and school leaders.

Development of new Digital Strategy for Schools

The current Digital Strategy for Schools expires at the end of this school year and the development of a new strategy is now underway. This new strategy will build on the existing one whilst also taking into account the many developments in digital technologies and their embedding across the education system as well as any emerging priorities.

Stakeholders have an opportunity to inform the development of the new strategy and are encouraged to express their views in terms of the implementation of the current strategy, any challenges that arose and their suggestions for areas and priorities that the future strategy should address.

This open call for public submissions plays an integral part in the overall consultation framework and development of the new strategy

You are therefore invited to complete the following template and submit no later than Monday 10 May.

Please indicate if this submission is made in a personal capacity or on behalf of your institution, organisation or group.

Written submissions may be in English or Irish.

Confidentiality

Submissions will be analysed by the Programme Board for the Development of the Strategy and it is also intended to make the submissions available on the Department's webpages as part of the outcome of the overall consultation process.

Contributors are requested to note that it is the Department's policy to treat all submissions received as being in the public domain unless confidentiality is specifically requested. Respondents are, therefore, requested to clearly identify material they consider to be confidential and to place same in a separate annex to their response, labelled "confidential".

Freedom of Information

Respondents' attention is drawn to the fact that information provided to the Department may be disclosed in response to a request under the Freedom of Information Act. Therefore, should you consider that any information you provide is commercially sensitive, please identify same, and specify the reason for its sensitivity. The Department will consult with any potentially affected respondent regarding information identified as sensitive before deciding on any Freedom of Information request.

https://www.gov.ie/en/consultation/7d09a-digital-strategy-for-schools/

Open Call for Submissions on the Development of the new Digital Strategy for Schools

Digital Strategy for Schools Consultation Framework

The current Digital Strategy for Schools 2015-2020 expires at the end of this school year and the development of a new strategy is now underway. The new strategy will build on the existing one whilst also taking into account the progress made to date in embedding digital technologies in teaching, learning and assessment, new developments in digital technologies as well as any emerging priorities.

Approach

In order to ensure a comprehensive review of the existing Digital Strategy for Schools 2015-2020 and to inform the development of the new strategy, a wide-ranging inclusive consultation framework is required to ensure a meaningful and effective consultation process. The new Digital Strategy for Schools Consultation Framework proposes the following approach to allow for this:

1. Open public call for written submissions, now open at link

2. An easily accessible digital questionnaire for all teachers, principals and students

3. Focus groups on specific themes with main stakeholders (for e.g. education partners, industry, students, parents)

4. Establishment of a core Consultative Group, which will include the management bodies, unions, parents' representative bodies and industry representatives. The Consultative Group will meet on a regular basis with other key stakeholders invited to attend depending on the themes to be discussed.

5. Bilateral's with other Departments and Agencies , including Northern Ireland, the EU and the UK

Any queries in relation to this template and any other element of the development of the new digital strategy can also be submitted to DSSP2021@education.gov.ie

[1]https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/69fb88-digital-strategy-for-schools/

Respondent's Name

Geraldine D'Arcy

Personal or Organisational Submission

Organisational

Organisation/Institution

IPPN – the Irish Primary Principals' Network, the professional body for primary school leaders (95% of schools are members) and an official education partner of the Department of Education

Position

Advocacy & Communications Manager

Address

IPPN National Support Office

Richmond

Glounthaune

T45 P406

Co. Cork

Telephone

021 4824070

Email address

geraldine.darcy@ippn.ie

Date

Monday 10th May 2021

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.**

   - The aims of the current strategy were very laudable – '*to realise the potential of digital technologies to enhance teaching, learning and assessment so that Ireland's young people become engaged thinkers, active learners, knowledge constructors and global citizens to participate fully in society and the economy. The strategy promotes the embedding of digital technologies in all classroom and school activity so that the use of digital technology becomes a seamless part of the whole education experience. It underpins the development of 21st Century skills in our young people; skills such as communication and collaboration, critical thinking and analytic reasoning, research skills, creativity, problem solving and team work.'*

   - The strategy set out clear goals for schools to aim towards during the period 2015-2020. Every school would certainly aim to realise such potential and achieve the goals. However, the €210m funding over the course of the strategy was not sufficient to enable it to be achieved in full in all schools. As Minister Foley stated in her press release regarding the development of the new Digital Strategy **'***real commitment has been shown by school leaders and teachers in planning for the embedding of digital technologies, to support teaching and learning, and has been key to the successful implementation to date*'.

   - That so many schools have achieved so much is testament to their own commitment, determination and resourcefulness in filling the funding, resourcing and skills gaps.

   - A lot of work was done on a voluntary basis by those working in the Digital Schools programme, Coder-Dojo and other digital learning-related initiatives.

   - Significant investment by teachers outside school hours was made in upskilling to meet the challenges and the aims of the strategy but this was done on an ad hoc individual basis thus cannot necessarily be seen as part of the success of the strategy.

   - Official education engagement with ICT, such as IT 2000 (DE 1997) and ICT Framework: a structured approach to ICT in Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA 2007) initiated primary schools' formal engagement with ICT. The impact of these early policies and initiatives was somewhat hampered due to lack of teacher skills and resources, as well as a disconnect with the Primary School curriculum. These were accompanied by some funding, which subsequently petered out. The NCTE/PDST

and Scoilnet continued to provide a measure of support for schools, including the broadband service desk. The Digital Strategy for Schools 2015-2020 (DES 2015) was welcomed by schools, as was the long-awaited Digital Learning Framework (2017). They filled a vacuum that had developed in relation to formal policy for digital learning. The accompanying funding assisted schools to begin to address the deficit/updating of digital equipment and resources.

- The information days for Principals, and subsequent seminars on School Planning for 1-2 staff members, were welcome. Also welcome was the option to apply for PDST support in relation to DLF Planning.

- Over the past 5-6 years, the PDST has developed a range of resources, including their Exemplars of Good Practice Videos and a wide selection of training webinars. Its TiE team has a great range of expertise and knowledge.

- The endeavours in relation to providing adequate broadband to primary schools, most recently in relation to the National Broadband Ireland programme to plug in 700 primary schools in rural areas, are very welcome, as are PDST's endeavours to trouble-shoot and upgrade individual schools where possible. To bring all primary schools to 100MB+ broadband as soon as possible, in line with post-primary schools is the next critical step towards equity across all schools.

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

- IPPN's submission presents the issues and challenges that are common to a large number of primary schools and highlights some specific challenges that pertain to a smaller number of schools, depending on where each school is along the pathway towards digital excellence. The system cannot treat primary schools as a homogenous group – there is too much variety in contexts in the sector for this to be possible, and this is also at the heart of the challenge.

We present here 5 specific areas of challenge:

1. Annual Funding – Equipment, Infrastructure and IT Support

2. Curriculum Digital Content

3. Digital Learning Framework (DLF)

4. CPD

5. School capacity

1. Annual Funding – Equipment, Infrastructure and IT Support

- Keeping the school's digital infrastructure going to support leaning has been a major challenge for a significant majority of schools. A commitment to annual funding for equipment (purchase, maintenance/repair and replacement), school infrastructure (including maintenance/upgrades) and IT support is required, as follows:
  - o Equipment
    - Digital devices in classrooms – interactive teaching solutions (screens/boards/projectors), networked computers
    - Staff portable devices with appropriate software, including anti-virus and malware protection
    - Sufficient pupil devices with access to appropriate digital content, and up-to-date online safety/protection measures which will allow them to:
      "to collect evidence, record progress, evaluate and reflect;
      to follow their individual learning needs and preferences;
      to access, evaluate and interpret the results of formative, summative, self- and peer-assessments;
      to create, source, critique and manage information;
      to respectfully communicate, collaborate, and co-create knowledge;
      to creatively and critically develop their competence as autonomous, self-directed learners and to set meaningful personal goals for future learning."
      (Digital Learning Framework 2017)

- o School Infrastructure
    - Local area network
    - High-speed broadband – probably the single most common cause of disaffection among teachers with digital learning is unstable broadband access, which affects planning as much as teaching and learning
    - Adequate Wi-Fi in every school
- o Technical Support
    - Schools have to be able to focus on the pedagogical aspects of digital learning and need to be able to call on skilled technical support, as needed, to trouble-shoot and resolve any technical problems. Such support can be organised locally by the school until such time as there is a regional infrastructure in place, as is the case with ETB schools. Autonomy is important to resolve the existing problems – schools are best positioned and should be trusted to work with local IT support providers to trouble-shoot problems where the provider knows what is in place, and are often able to get excellent value for money as these providers are part of the local community and supportive of the school. It is, however, unsustainable to expect schools to rely on the generosity of teachers, other staff, Board members and the parent body to keep the technology running smoothly. It also drives inequity as schools in areas of socio-economic disadvantage are less likely to be able to call on such expertise, or to fundraise to resolve the financial shortfall.

2. **Curriculum Digital Content**

- With the emphasis on the constructivist approach to learning, and the creation of digital resources and content by teachers and pupils, the necessity to provide digital curriculum content may be perceived to have somewhat diminished. Nevertheless, it has not disappeared.

- With the increasing expectation that teachers will become less reliant on textbooks, they cannot be left in a vacuum. Scoilnet goes a small way towards addressing this demand.

- While teachers have always created teaching resources, these were used to supplement what was already available.

- It cannot be left to private publishing companies to fill this need, by providing (and charging) schools for digital content which is aimed at supporting their textbooks.
- IPPN recommends the production and dissemination of high-quality interactive digital content for all age groups and in every curriculum area, especially those areas unique to the Irish curriculum.

3. **Digital Learning Framework (DLF)**

- The DLF was welcomed by schools, as it promised to give clear objectives and "a roadmap to help schools manage the transformation of teaching and learning as a result of new digital technologies." However, it was arranged in such a way as to fit the LAOS framework and a lot of its clarity was lost in this translation. Many schools have found it not to be user-friendly and confusing to negotiate. For example, a school wishing to address the area of Assessment will, upon examining the DLF, find it referenced in five of the eight domains, and in a total of 31 different places. A re-organisation of the key areas of digital engagement under school-friendly headings, such as in the Digital Schools evaluation criteria, would greatly assist schools who wish to advance their digital agenda.

4. **CPD**

- The DLF's aspirations have ironically benefitted from the Covid-19 closures, which necessitated schools to react and respond by finding completely new ways of supporting pupil learning. They did this magnificently, under the circumstances – no forewarning, no experience, no training and a significant shortfall in resources. This was only achieved through teacher commitment, enthusiasm, professionalism, innovation, willingness and desire to meet the needs of their pupils.
- Credit must go also to the PDST staff. They produced an abundance of training materials to support the necessary remote teaching and learning situations.
- Unfortunately, all of this was done in a reactionary and ad-hoc manner. Primary teachers have been expected to upskill and engage with CPD on a voluntary, goodwill basis, in their own time after school hours.
- This has been an inherent flaw in the current Digital Strategy and its accompanying Digital Learning Framework. It is unrealistic to assume that CPD would just happen.

The completely inadequate provision for upskilling teachers, by organising formal digital learning CPD for school staffs, undermines the entire process.

- The emergency adoption of remote learning by all schools brings with it an opportunity to review how CPD is delivered to and for teachers.

- Perhaps remote learning as a tool to deliver CPD on digital technologies could be explored to expedite the roll-out, reduce costs versus face-to-face delivery, as well as showcase the technologies under discussion.

- A crucial point is that such a model would need to be provided directly to all teachers, on a school-wide basis, and facilitated during the working day.

5. **School capacity**

- To 'realise the potential of digital technologies to enhance teaching, learning and assessment' requires an investment in the professional development of <u>all</u> teachers, and focus and drive in each school.

- The train-the-trainer model of providing CPD to principals to disseminate to their teachers (which has been used for other content) is fundamentally flawed and cannot be used for such CPD. Principals cannot be expected to answer questions teachers will naturally have, and very definitely do not have the time to organise and facilitate CPD in this manner

- The ongoing moratorium on posts of responsibility is a serious impediment to the development of ICT curriculum leadership and expertise in schools and should be removed.

- Schools need designated staff members to lead the ICT aspect of teaching and learning in schools, and a support structure – including differentiated CPD - for these leaders to help integrate the DE Digital Strategy into all aspect of teaching and learning.

- If the Department is serious about the Digital Strategy and in ensuring it is implemented in all schools - not just those involved in the Digital Schools programme - investment in professional development and leadership capacity is paramount.

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.

The top priority is funding

As is well documented at this stage, the €210m of funding provided to schools during the current strategy, while a significant amount, has been given to schools in piecemeal fashion. Unfortunately, it came after a number of years when no funding for ICT was provided and so, has proven inadequate in ensuring that all schools have the following in place to support, implement and embed digital technologies in the teaching and learning. This point was part of IPPN's submission in January 2014 for the last Digital Strategy. Commitment to adequate **annual** funding is a key requirement, and is needed for the areas outlined in Section 2 as being deficient – Equipment, School Infrastructure and Technical Support.

We set out here three key priorities for the Digital Strategy funding:

1.   Funding for Local IT Support

2.   Capacity for ICT Advisory Support

3.   Teacher CPD.

   1. Funding for Local IT Support
- Significant ADDITIONAL funding needs to be provided to all schools to acquire local IT support as needed – as mentioned in Section 2 - to resolve technical issues with the digital infrastructure, as well as to upgrade and enhance it to meet the needs of the individual school, making optimal use of their equipment and in-house skills.
- We are aware that many schools have insufficient funding to address such issues and consequently these schools are not engaging with digital technology and cannot progress their digital learning plans.
   2. Capacity for ICT Advisory Support

- The small number of PDST TiE staff cannot physically support schools over the entire country, while simultaneously delivering their CPD mandate, project responsibilities and other activities.
- We recommend that the team be expanded to ensure that there is adequate capacity to support all schools in relation to:
  - school based support for planning, methodologies, pedagogical approaches, good practice, etc.
  - their digital infrastructure options and choices, so as to make the optimal use of the funding available in schools.

3. Teacher CPD

- As noted in Section 2, structured professional development for all teachers to ensure a baseline level of skill and digital teaching approaches/methodologies across all schools is essential.
- There are existing programmes to support those with more advanced knowledge and experience, but provision of the baseline needs to be structured, planned and prioritised as soon as possible to enable all schools to progress their digital journey in an equitable manner.

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

- All of the challenges outlined in Section 2 of this submission remain, and need to be addressed if the DE is serious about ensuring the success of the new Digital Strategy. *If it is a priority, the funding and supports to resource it - particularly those set out here as priorities in Section 3 - need to be put into place to make it happen.*
- Regular consultation with school leaders - around the pre-service Digital Learning Course content as part of Initial Teacher Education - would help ensure that it is relevant, current, practical and equips the NQTs with knowledge and skills which they can immediately use to digitise their teaching on a daily basis.
- PISA as an assessment tool across the relevant countries puts a regular spotlight on Irish pupil/student attainment across a range of measures, including the use and prevalence of technology for learning. To ensure Irish children aren't left behind and

continue to achieve at least average or better results will require further investment in teacher CPD, technical infrastructure in schools and curricular resources, as well as addressing inequities among pupils in accessing digital technologies in the home to engage with learning outside school along with their peers.

There are 2 other areas that the IPPN strongly proposes for incorporation in any future Digital Education planning:

1. **The Digital Education Action Plan (DEAP)**

- In September 2020, the EU published its '*Digital Education Action Plan 2021-2027*: *Resetting education and training for the digital age'* (EU 2020). This plan, which is based on the most current, up-to-date research and thinking, is forward-thinking and focuses on raising the quality and inclusiveness of education and the provision of digital skills for all. Its guiding principles recognise the pivotal role that digital education plays in increasing equality and inclusiveness, the need for investment (connectivity, equipment, organisational capacity, skills), the importance of digital competence as a core skill for educators and the benefits of a framework of transferrable training and certification.

- Its two overarching strategic priorities are:
  i.   Fostering the development of a high-performing digital education ecosystem
  ii.   Enhancing digital skills and competences for the digital transformation

- The objectives put forward within this plan are very much aligned with what is happening in Ireland, and also with what is happening in other European countries. The fourteen stated Actions include a range of highly desirable measures, some which will attract EU funding.

- IPPN believes that a correlation between the New Department of Education Digital Strategy and the current European DEAP, would be a positive connection which would also align us with the majority of our European partners.

To quote the DEAP itself, in Ireland we also:

"*need to use the lessons of recent months to step up our efforts and gradually evolve from temporary, emergency-focused remote education to more effective, sustainable and*

equitable digital education, as part of creative, flexible, modern and inclusive education and training. [This] requires strategic and concerted action, as well as the pooling of resources, investment and political will to move ahead at […] national level."

2. Digital Schools (DS)

- The Digital Schools award programme has been, in the past, a wonderful mechanism to highlight and celebrate the incredible work of schools, teachers, principals and Boards of Management, as well as parents and communities, who have embraced digital technologies (DTs) and surged ahead in being creative and innovative in embedding DT use in the culture of their schools. The award provides a unique forum to publicly acknowledge this and results in a community celebration of the achievement.

- When the award scheme is in operation, the aforementioned celebrations inspire other schools to follow suit. The programme can also give tangible information and data on how schools are performing on the digital agenda. Details on the number of schools awarded DS status (490), the success rate of schools being validated, the number of schools that have applied for the award and their level of their 'digital readiness' based on the initial self-evaluation, can supply strong performance indicators and verified data on the progress of the Digital Strategy for Schools. 2000 schools have registered their interest in becoming a Digital School.

- The programme requirements, under which schools are validated for DS status, are fully aligned with the SSE process. It is also fully aligned with the Digital Strategy, the Digital Learning Framework and all other DE-issued guidance on digital learning. Its criteria have been updated three times in the past year, and, by necessity, are dynamic, ensuring their continued alignment with DE policy and current trends.

- The DS award is widely recognised in Ireland, and is something to which a great many primary schools aspire, thus motivating them to embrace digital teaching and learning in order to achieve the required highly effective levels of practice. Digital Schools have always been a source of advice and support for other schools trying to elevate their digital engagement and this mentoring role has been formalised into the programme.

- IPPN recognises the significant benefits of this programme and recommends that:

- o it is fully reactivated at the earliest possible opportunity
- o that it be integral in any future policy relating to digital learning in the primary sector.

Relevant Research

- *'Left to their own devices'* research publication, authored by Dr Eemer Eivers, Research Fellow at the ERC, and published by IPPN in 2019, highlighted that school leaders and teachers need support in figuring out how best to utilise ICT in schools to facilitate pupil learning. PIRLS 2016 indicates there is a need for teacher CPD in relation to critical evaluation of information presented online, which can be taught as a whole-class activity, as well as using ICT for higher-order activities and thinking skills, such as 'more synthesis, evaluation and problem-solving'. Dr Eivers posits the following key points, with which IPPN agrees
  - o '*It is worth considering how to vary the types of homework assigned and to examine the value that homework might add. Rather than using it to simply practice or reinforce skills learned, it is worth exploring more frequent use of larger, project-based tasks. Such tasks could help develop pupils' research and evaluative skills, ICT-related, and more generally.*'
  - o *Data from National Assessments indicates a* strong interest among teachers in CPD related to integrating ICT into instruction, particularly in mathematics. However, PIRLS and TIMSS show that uptake of CPD was not particularly high among Irish teachers relative to international averages, and was noticeably poorer for CPD related to integrating ICT into science. To support the *Digital Learning Framework,* PDST Technology in Education now provide an expanded CPD programme to assist schools in embedding digital technologies into learning and teaching. Ideally, school leaders should draw on this expanded programme to support more teachers in accessing CPD that focusses on subject-specific pedagogical approaches for ICT integration. In particular, CPD for mathematics and science would be beneficial.
- As IPPN has indicated on a number of previous occasions, the timescales involved in making submissions often do not enable us to reach out to practitioners to seek their feedback, to collate and review same in order to complete a submission on time. While we did seek observations from members, due to the ongoing impact of the pandemic on schools and the time constraints, IPPN's observations in this submission are limited to those of the

leadership team and a small number of school leaders who have a significant interest in digital technology in schools and were generous with their time and knowledge.

- IPPN would very much appreciate an opportunity to discuss our submission, and the draft strategy, with the relevant DE officials prior to its completion, with a view to ensuring that it is in line with schools' capacity to implement and embed.