

INTO Submission

Literacy, Numeracy

and Digital Literacy

Strategy Consultation

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Submission on behalf of the INTO

To the Department of Education and the
Department of Children, Equality, Disability,
Integration and Youth

On a New Literacy, Numeracy and Digital
Literacy Strategy



Introduction

The Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO) represents over 50,000 teachers at all school levels on the island of Ireland. We welcome the opportunity to respond to the Department of Education's (DE) consultation on the new 'Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy'.

The development of this strategy is taking place during a time of significant change in the primary education system. The unprecedented closure of schools over several periods of the Covid pandemic has led to a delay in the rollout of the new Maths Curriculum. The implementation of this curriculum will likely be run in tandem with the implementation of the new Primary Curriculum Framework. While the INTO acknowledges that this cycle of change is important to update and modernise our education system, the union demands that any new strategy for literacy, numeracy and digital literacy in primary education up to 2030 solely focuses on embedding these new curriculums.

The INTO welcomes the approach taken by the DE to include stakeholders in meaningful consultations to build this strategy. The INTO notes that the discussion paper accompanying this consultation acknowledges the key role played by primary education in our society, and the critical role of the teachers therein. On the other hand, the discussion paper exposes the inadequate forethought of the DE around issues in primary education that have been apparent to teachers for many years, and which have been the subject of continued demands from the INTO. These include but are not limited to large class sizes, the lack of organisation of a supply of substitute teachers, underfunding of schools, inadequate ICT infrastructure, and the unending pressure placed on principal teachers to run their schools in a system which devolves responsibility to them without adequate and appropriate supports. Unless the Department can demonstrate that it has a plan to rectify these issues as part of this strategy then its implementation will be a fraught one.

Enabling Parents and Communities to Support Children's Literacy and Numeracy Development

The home environment plays a critical role in a child's education. Studies have consistently shown that children who grow up in supportive and stimulating home environments are more likely to do well in school and achieve academic success (Mac Giolla Phádraig, 2010). Children who grow up in homes with a high level of parental engagement and support for learning have better academic outcomes than those who do not, show higher levels of motivation and self-esteem, are more likely to have better mental health outcomes and are less likely to experience school and societal behavioural problems. The importance of parents and caregivers supporting their children's education by providing a positive and stimulating home environment, being involved in their education, and supporting their learning and development cannot be overstated.

Here the strength of schools' parent associations might be used to increase parent engagement with their children's learning across all school levels. Associations could work in a singular capacity or a cluster of associations might come together to provide support to parents in larger towns and cities. A mentoring programme could be initiated to connect new school parents with parents who have children attending the school already. Mentoring would allow for the sharing of ideas and develop an environment of parents supporting parents.

Parent Associations could also be used to set up after schools and weekend programmes for pupils and provide courses, related to child education and development, to parents. These programmes could be used to further the academic and social development of pupils and encourage parent engagement with their child's education. Engaging parents in this way would allow parents to become active members of their community and empower them to take ownership of aspects of their children's learning. This empowering of parent associations should be viewed as an extension of their voice in communities and should move them away from being solely tied to schools. This would ensure that any revisions of



Parent Association committees' remits within a community would not add to the workload of school leaders.

While the positive academic and social outcomes of parental involvement are highlighted in this consultation's discussion paper there is no mention of how socio-economic circumstances can affect parental involvement. The ability of schools and parents to build and maintain home-school links varies across communities in Ireland. Long working hours, poor conditions of employment and low household earnings are some of the barriers parents in lower socio-economic areas face when trying to engage with their child's education. It is worrying to note that the economic and social context of parents is not discussed under this heading in the consultation paper. The INTO would hope to see a more balanced perspective of parent and community involvement and would also hope to see the development of strategic outcomes which recognise the specific needs of all communities and supports them accordingly.

The transition from early learning centres (ELC) to primary education is highlighted in the discussion paper as being of vital importance and that strengthening the process between these school levels is a priority. The INTO recognises that the relationship between ELC and primary schools should be nurtured and respected to best meet the needs of pupils and teachers but also demands that a comprehensive strategy be put in place around all major school transitions including primary to post-primary education. The INTO would also require assurances that any actions agreed upon in the new strategy would not overburden teachers and school leaders with extra administrative duties or added out of school hours engagement.

A cross departmental and fully integrated approach must be adopted in this new strategy when developing strategic outcomes which enable parents and communities to support their child's learning in literacy, numeracy and digital literacy. There should be a focus on community driven initiatives which do not lean on an already stretched school system. The strategy should also take into consideration the importance of a care policy. This would ensure that any intended outcomes are created with an understanding that the care duties associated with raising a child in Ireland should be shared equally among men and women. This new strategy will be all the stronger if the ideas of societal equality and equity underpin its development.

Supporting Teachers' and Early Years Educators' Professional Practise and Leadership

Principal teachers continue to carry an extraordinary burden in primary education. The DE continues to devolve responsibility to schools, without providing the supports required. Principals find themselves having to provide more and more information, support and documentation not only to their school and staff, but also, to their Board of Managements (BOMs) and their local communities. Alongside this, the vast majority of primary schools operate with minimal finance and IT support and no human resource management services. This must be remedied, as the success of this new strategy will rely heavily on the engagement of our school leaders.

While the discussion paper for this consultation does recognise the pivotal role of principals it does not provide any insight into how this new strategy would support them in the improvement of literacy, numeracy and digital literacy in their schools. The INTO would call for the expansion of the additional release time for principals and the reintroduction of release time for deputies. The INTO also demands that the middle management layer removed from schools is fully restored so that schools' leadership teams can spend more time planning for teaching and learning. There should also be a review of the thresholds for the appointment of administrative principals and deputies that accounts for all staff, not just the teaching staff. All special schools and schools with special classes should qualify for the appointment of an administrative principal.



Support for school leaders must also be reflected in the remuneration of school leaders and take into account the management of ancillary staff. By implementing these supports the DE will improve the ability of school leaders to spend time and energy on leading teaching and learning to support pupils to reach their full potential.

Lifelong Learning is widely acknowledged as a strength of the teaching profession. Unfortunately, this acknowledgement alone is not enough. Teachers are routinely expected to complete continuous professional development (CPD) outside of working hours, often funding it themselves. This is not the norm in other professions. To truly support the concept of teachers as lifelong learners, the INTO calls for the DE to provide the time and funding needed for continuous professional development at all stages of a teacher's career.

The Teacher Fee Refund Scheme is no longer fit for purpose and has seen a decrease in the average fee refund to individual teachers in recent years. The review and reform of the scheme must include greater funding and a portion of that funding must be ringfenced specifically for teachers' own professional development. Furthermore, teachers must be upskilled to implement new programmes, curriculum changes, and initiatives. Professional development for system-driven change should be provided during school hours and at no cost to teachers. The cascade model of having one staff member receive training and then train their colleagues has not been effective. A whole-school approach to professional development is necessary and should be supported at school level by the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST) through sustained in-school support. If the DE is truly committed to helping educators improve, it must address the lack of support for teachers as lifelong learners.

The INTO stands in solidarity with our ELC colleagues. The privatisation of ELC has led to a system that is not always fit for purpose. The ELC community should be supported in their attempts to set qualification, curriculum and pay standards for the sector. The DE should immediately introduce a network of ELC schools with a well-resourced child centred curriculum into every community in Ireland. For there to be a truly effective transition between ELC and primary education nationalisation is required. The INTO recommends that the Early Start programme is revisited and that the learnings from this valuable service are used to expand the scheme.

Improving the Curriculum and the Learning Experience

The process of creating a curriculum is ongoing and dynamic. To be effective, it must follow the cycle of creation, implementation, revision, and modification. As we exist in a rapidly changing environment, it is crucial to regularly review the curriculum and make targeted modifications where needed. In Ireland, the curriculum has undergone significant changes with the introduction of the Aistear framework for early years, a new Junior Cycle framework, and the ongoing review of Senior Cycle education. Currently the focus is on the Draft Primary Curriculum Framework and ensuring that it aligns with the overall education structure and serves all pupils, including those with additional learning needs.

The new curriculum places a strong emphasis on the role of teachers as "agentic professionals". This may be an unfamiliar concept for some teachers. The INTO recognises the importance of "Teacher Agency," as outlined in the Draft Primary Curriculum Framework as it empowers teachers to take control of teaching and learning in their classrooms and a thorough discussion about the concept of agency to prepare teachers for the primary curriculum framework will be essential. For the new literacy, numeracy and digital literacy strategy to be successful the concept of 'agentic teaching' must underpin the development of any supports provided. It is important that teachers feel they have the flexibility to make the decisions that best support the needs of the pupils in their classrooms.

The INTO welcomes the increased focus on play-based learning and playful teaching methods for all primary school classes. The benefits of these approaches in promoting discovery-based, child-centred learning and positive attitudes for literacy, numeracy and digital literacy are well documented. However,



the INTO must express its concern about the lack of proper training and professional development for Aistear, which was never adequately funded or resourced so that it could be fully implemented in primary schools. The INTO recommends that teachers receive up-to-date CPD on play-based pedagogy throughout the lifetime of the new strategy. Additionally, schools need significantly more funding to purchase and develop the necessary resources and supports for play-based approaches to be fully adopted in their classrooms. The INTO again wishes to highlight the inadequate funding provided to primary and special schools in Ireland, which prevents them from providing the resources and equipment needed to improve children's learning experiences.

Providing teachers with enough time to familiarise themselves with the new strategy is a key priority. The INTO must emphasise the importance of a proper implementation phase that allows schools sufficient time to become familiar with any new content, objectives, and teaching methods that may be part of the new strategy. Comprehensive in-service training is necessary to help teachers develop confidence and fully understand any new developments that may come from this strategy.

The issue of an ever-increasing workload for school principals and teachers is another factor that will impact on curriculum change and detract from pupils' learning experience. More and more time is being spent on administrative tasks to the detriment of teaching and learning. It is extremely important that any new strategy does not increase this workload but looks to simplify and streamline the planning load associated with literacy and numeracy. The INTO notes increasing calls from members that any new curriculum, strategy or initiative be accompanied with planning and policy templates to ensure more time is spent on the teaching and learning experiences of their pupils.

The INTO must draw attention to the lack of clear messaging that currently exists between education bodies and teachers in schools around curriculum change and consultation processes. Detailed and clear messaging at all stages of a new curriculum, strategy or initiative ensures that all stakeholders are aware of the process and in turn can take part in a meaningful, informed way. It is unfair to claim that teachers don't engage with the current avenues of communication. The INTO recommends that the DE and other stakeholders, review their communication structures and develop a strategy that ensures the greatest number of schools, principals and teachers receive the required information to support system changes.

Supporting Diverse Learners to Achieve their Potential

For this new strategy to be successful it needs to account for needs of all children including those with special education needs (SEN). Children with additional needs must have access to all necessary therapies, supports and resources so that they can feel successful in literacy, numeracy and digital literacy during the lifetime of this strategy. The provision of required supports and services has not kept up with the increasing enrolment of children with SEN into mainstream and special schools. This lack of supports is very concerning and is creating undue worry for schools, teachers and parents. The therapies in schools pilot project should be expanded to all schools during the duration of this strategic plan and the plan to introduce nursing supports to schools should be fully implemented.

Managing challenging behaviour, often related to special education needs, is a major concern for INTO members. Without guidance or training, teachers and other pupils are at risk of assaults and injuries. The Department of Education has long promised guidelines in this area and they must be delivered as soon as possible.

Thousands of children, young people and their families are fleeing from their home countries due to the threat of war and persecution. These children and young people must have access to education. Ireland's education system must address their academic needs and provide them with a sense of normalcy after their displacement. Any strategy that is developed must include long-term plans to support the needs of this pupil cohort. The establishment of preparatory classes or 'bridging' classes to provide children with the necessary skills (including language skills) should be explored. The granting



of additional support hours and teaching posts to schools would be beneficial in ensuring the academic success of these new pupils in the areas of literacy, numeracy and digital literacy.

Barnardo's indicates that over 3,000 children in Ireland are homeless today. They also highlight that thousands more children are experiencing 'hidden homelessness' where they are living in overcrowded, unsuitable or unstable accommodation. A range of studies have outlined the adverse educational and behavioural outcomes that face pupils experiencing homelessness. This is a major failing of our society at large and the need for suitable accommodation for all children must be immediately addressed. The new strategy must highlight the needs of these pupils and offer solutions to supporting these children who may not be able to engage fully with their learning due to circumstances beyond their control.

Improving Assessment and Evaluation to Support Better Learning in Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy

The concept of "intuitive assessment" as presented in the Primary Curriculum Framework (NCCA) asserts that assessment is not just a one-time event, but rather a continuous process that occurs throughout the classroom environment. This approach shifts the focus from traditional, one-off assessment events to a more holistic view of pupil learning and progress. By recognising the role of teachers' professional judgement and observations, intuitive assessment allows for more nuanced evaluations of pupil understanding and learning. A whole school professional development plan should be drawn up which aims to embed intuitive assessment strategies alongside assessment events and summative methods already in place in schools. This new strategy should, through intuitive assessment, seek to lessen the anxiety that can be experienced by teachers and pupils around high stakes one off testing.

The use of the term "intuitive" in this context should be used with caution as it implies that the assessment process is based on intuition alone, rather than the professional judgement and expertise of the teacher. It is important to ensure that the term for this form of assessment accurately reflects the professional nature of these observations and a different term may need to be adopted.

Regarding formal assessments, teachers would benefit from professional development and guidance on how to effectively communicate the results of standardised testing to parents and guardians. There is a growing trend in the system to expect pupils to achieve STEN scores of 8, 9 and 10 year after year in standardised tests. Parents and teachers alike see it as a failure when lower STEN scores are achieved. A dedicated strategic plan needs to be developed to provide training to teachers and inform parents about understanding scores from standardised testing. Effective communication of assessment results can help to promote a better understanding of pupil progress and provides valuable feedback for both teachers and parents.

There still remains an overreliance on standardised testing and summative assessment. This outcomes-based model continues to create high levels of test anxiety for pupils and puts pressure on teachers to prioritise test results over pupil development. Standardised testing and summative assessments are a crude form of understanding a child's progress as they only provide a snapshot of pupil knowledge and understanding in specific areas at a point in time. This model cannot accurately reflect the full range of pupil learning and progress. It also fails to take into account the social, economic and lived experience of the individual pupil. This new strategy must continue the process of building a holistic assessment model based on teachers' professional expertise while moving away from the current outcomes-based model.

With that in mind, the necessary training, resources and time to embed formative, intuitive, pupil self-assessment and peer assessment methodologies across the primary school system needs to be a significant element of assessment in this new strategy. Formative assessment allows teachers to provide pupils with the support they need before and during lesson to ensure that they achieve success. Formative assessment caters for the ability of all pupils including pupils with SEN and exceptionally able



children. Pupils should also be provided with enough opportunities to reflect on their own learning and progress. Self-assessment allows pupils to take ownership of their learning, set personal goals and develop self-regulation strategies. A child may be more motivated to learn when they have a personal connection with their learning outcomes. Alongside this, pupils should be provided with enough opportunities to assess and provide feedback to their peers, which would strengthen their ability to understand different perspectives and improve their collaborative and communication skills. This new strategy for literacy, numeracy and digital literacy would be considered a success, if by the end of its lifetime it has ensured the above assessment methods are fully embedded in all Irish primary classrooms.

Digital Literacy

Today's pupils face a world that is rapidly changing in a way never before experienced. Schools have the ongoing task of integrating new technology and digital strategies into their lessons to provide rich learning experiences for all learners, including those with special educational needs. Studies have shown that pupils are struggling to adapt to these digital learning environments due to their limited digital literacy skills. At the primary school level, our curriculum should reflect these changes in society and aim to equip our pupils with the necessary ICT skills to confidently, responsibly, and safely engage in an ever-changing digital world.

Digital literacy enables teachers and pupils to access and interact with learning using a broad range of media but is not fully understood within our schools. Further study is required to fully understand the implications of developing and implementing digital literacy strategies in schools in the Irish context. It is clear that the skills needed in education are much broader than those needed 10 years ago, therefore it is essential to start exploring digital literacy skills to support teaching and learning. The INTO would like to see a strategy on digital literacy that supports teachers and pupils alike.

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the importance of digital literacy for educators and pupils. While the results of the sudden shift to online learning were mixed, it became clear that our school systems were not well-prepared to support digital learning. This period also revealed further inequalities in the system, particularly in terms of access to expertise and training, broadband, and ICT infrastructure. A strategic priority must be to ensure equal access to digital learning by investing in infrastructure, professional development, technical support, and high-speed broadband in all Irish primary schools.

Assistive technology (AT) has greatly improved the learning experiences of children with special educational needs. AT can be used to enhance the functional capabilities of pupils with SEN and is directly beneficial to their education. The Department of Education provides funding to schools for purchasing equipment for pupils with physical or communicative needs. This pupil-specific scheme aligns with the child-centred nature of our curriculum and aims to provide alternative ways for pupils with SEN to access teaching and learning. The INTO believes that in a rapidly digitising world, increased access to AT for pupils with special educational needs is crucial for inclusion and we would call on the DE to increase and extend the funding of AT across the primary sector.

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the digital divide that exists in our society. Some pupils will be left behind if this divide is not addressed. Even before the crisis, research showed that nearly one-third of the world's young people were already digitally excluded (UNESCO). School closures worsened this divide, and those who were already at a disadvantage fell further behind. This can be clearly seen in research conducted by Maynooth University (Dempsey & Burke). This strategy needs to be mindful of the divide and secure the proper funding and supports to ensure this gap is closed for all learners.

The growing use of social media platforms in recent years has made it important for teachers to exercise caution for both pupils and themselves. School management has a responsibility to protect teachers from potential online exposure and concerns around cyber security has been brought up by a number of our members in leadership roles. This strategy will need to work with school leaders to ensure the online safety and privacy of teachers is protected.



In addition to safeguarding teachers and pupils, parents need to be educated on the dangers of internet use and online safety. Many teachers address cyber safety through SPHE, with "Internet Safety Week" being a key event in the school calendar. Bullying on social media can pose a challenge for teachers and principals who are often expected to deal with issues which occur outside of the school setting. Parents must be tasked with educating themselves around safe internet usage so they can actively safeguard their children outside of the school environment. The INTO believes that to effectively and safely engage with technology, develop digital literacy skills and be responsible digital citizens, pupils and parents must be trained in methods that improve cyber safety. An outreach programme aimed at increasing parents and carers knowledge around internet safety should be included in this strategy.

Conclusion

The INTO is dedicated to ensuring that no pupil leaves primary school without proper literacy, numeracy and digital literacy skills. As a union we ask that all the necessary supports are provided so that schools, teachers, parents and pupils can implement and engage fully with any new strategic outcomes. Investing in schools and teachers to increase their capabilities around the teaching of these subjects is crucial. Furthermore, it is important to empower and support parents to strengthen their role as their children's primary educators. The government must take responsibility for creating an education system which considers the educational, cultural, social, and economic needs of all learners and enables them to feel successful in the areas of literacy, numeracy and digital literacy.

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