



IPPN Submission to the Department of Education

Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy

February 2023

1 INTRODUCTION

The Irish Primary Principals' Network (IPPN) is the officially-recognised professional body for the leaders of Irish primary schools. Established in 1999, IPPN is an independent, not-for-profit voluntary association with a local, regional and national presence. Recognised by the Minister for Education as an official Education Partner, IPPN works with the Department of Education (DE), the National Parents' Council, management bodies, unions, education agencies, academic institutions and children's charities towards the advancement of primary education. IPPN articulates the collective knowledge and professional experience of over 6,000 Principals and Deputy Principals, leading Ireland's 3,200+ primary schools.

As the professional body for Irish primary school leaders, IPPN shares the government's stated ambition that *'every child and young person in Ireland should have the necessary literacy, numeracy and digital literacy skills to fully participate in society'* and agrees that these skills are *'crucial to a person's ability to develop fully as an individual, to live a satisfying and rewarding life and to participate fully in our society.'*

We set out in this submission IPPN's perspective on the Department's proposed Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy. We would welcome the opportunity to discuss it with the Department and the education stakeholders.

2 SCHOOL LEADERSHIP CAPACITY

2.1 SUSTAINABLE LEADERSHIP

The importance of school leadership as an influence on and key determinant of pupil learning has been clearly established. The equation is simple – effective school leadership leads to school effectiveness which, in turn, leads to better outcomes for children. It is, therefore, a priority that school leaders should be empowered and supported to deliver that effective leadership in our schools, thereby maintaining their focus on what is most closely aligned with their core purpose – leading teaching and learning.

From the system’s perspective, it makes sense that having the most effective people in school leadership roles will have a consequential positive impact on the effectiveness of those schools – the right people in the right positions, focusing on the right things. Anything that negatively impinges on or detracts from the potential effectiveness of school leaders has a detrimental impact on schools and, more importantly, on learners. To better ensure leadership effectiveness and the sustainability of those leadership roles, any such impinging or negative factors must be addressed.

There is a largely unaddressed, if not unspoken, crisis relating to the sustainability of school leadership in Irish primary schools. In order to understand the extent, causes and impact of this crisis, IPPN explored how leadership is practised and experienced in our primary schools, informed by the data we garnered from our member survey, to which over 1,000 school leaders responded.

We asked those school leaders to rate the current sustainability of their leadership role (0 being totally unsustainable and 10 being fully sustainable). For the purposes of the survey, we defined 'sustainable leadership' to be “progressive and enduring” in the context of the “supports, structures and practices in Irish primary education” (McGovern 2015). Their responses (see Figure 2.1) tell us that

- school leaders rate the level of sustainability of their leadership roles at just less than 4 (3.96)
- principals of DEIS schools rate the level of sustainability of their leadership roles at just 3.76
- teaching principals rate the level of sustainability of their leadership roles at just 3.53
- 26.3% of school leaders rated the sustainability of their leadership role at 0, 1 or 2.

In order to develop a deeper understanding of why school leaders experience their roles as unsustainable, we explored the context in which school leadership is practised in Ireland, which is characterised by:

- a lack of role clarity
- increasing role complexity
- the breadth of responsibilities
- inadequate infrastructural supports and
- the workload that arises from all of the above.

In order to ensure school leadership of the highest quality in our schools, and a leadership role that is sustainable and less likely to have a negative impact on the health and wellbeing of school leaders, consideration needs to be given to the following:

- the development of a shared understanding of what constitutes effective school leadership and the core purpose of that leadership
- the extent to which school leaders are deflected from their core purpose by having to take on responsibilities and tasks not related to that purpose and how that impacts on the sustainability of their roles
- the skills, knowledge and competencies school leaders require to enable them to be effective
- whether there is a need for a systematic process of preparation for leadership and what it might look like
- whether the process by which school leaders are recruited could be improved
- whether all school leaders are afforded sufficient time and space to exercise both the leadership and management dimensions to their roles
- how leadership can be shared and supported more effectively in schools
- how the current governance structure in primary schools is impacting on the sustainability of school leadership roles and how that structure could be reimagined.

IPPN's publication ***Primary School Leadership: The Case for Urgent Action - A Roadmap to Sustainability*** can be accessed by [clicking here](#).

3 KEY FACTORS THAT WILL UNDERPIN THE NEW STRATEGY

IPPN sets out here our suggestions and thinking in relation to the seven key factors that will underpin the new strategy:

3.1 ENABLING PARENTS AND COMMUNITIES TO SUPPORT CHILDREN'S LITERACY AND NUMERACY DEVELOPMENT

IPPN suggests that the Department and stakeholders consider leveraging the Partnership Schools Project in relation to this area. It is led by the National Parents' Council Primary and is very well regarded by participating schools.

3.2 SUPPORTING TEACHERS' AND EARLY YEARS EDUCATORS' PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE AND LEADERSHIP SKILLS

The *National Strategy: Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life 2011-2020* set out actions across six Pillars of the education system, including Pillar 3, 'Building the capacity of school leadership'. It is IPPN's contention that there has been wholly inadequate progress in relation to this element of the strategy. We fully acknowledge the positive impact of the Centre for School Leadership and the coaching and mentoring supports made available to those in the role of principal, this has been focused on leadership 'practice' as opposed to 'capacity'. The structural supports required to free up school leaders to effectively lead learning in schools – including literacy, numeracy and digital literacy - are inadequate, as evidenced in the recent IPPN research publication '[Primary School Leadership: The Case for Urgent Action - A Roadmap to Sustainability](#)'.

We note the change in emphasis from 2011-2020 strategy relating to educators from '*building leadership capacity*' to the new strategy's focus on '*professional practice and leadership skills*'. The fact that school leaders' capacity is no longer mentioned as a key factor underpinning the new strategy is concerning.

As the discussion document notes, '*Principals and deputy principals have a pivotal role to play in creating an environment that supports effective teaching and learning. They lead, support and monitor improvements in literacy, numeracy and digital literacy throughout their schools.*' A key recommendation from IPPN's Sustainable Leadership report is the need for adequate time and space

to lead. This is highly relevant for the successful implementation of the new literacy and numeracy strategy.

3.3 IMPROVING THE CURRICULUM AND LEARNING EXPERIENCE

IPPN wholeheartedly supports the aim for all learners to *'have an opportunity to experience a broad, balanced and fulfilling curriculum that supports all aspects of their development, not just the academic dimension, but the social, emotional, imaginative, aesthetic, and physical dimensions as well'*.

It is heartening to see the hard work of educators, school leaders, children and their families being recognised in the PISA 2018 results (Figure 1), which placed Ireland fifth among OECD countries. This work needs to be further acknowledged by the Department.

It should not be assumed that this improvement can continue without the requisite supports to schools to maintain the momentum, particularly in light of the evidence of burnout among school leaders highlighted in the Deakin University 2022 report on **'Irish Principal and Deputy Principal Health and Wellbeing'** [INSERT LINK] as well as evidence of mental health issues and learning loss among children owing to the pandemic. Any targets for the coming years must take these significant issues into account and include actions to counteract them.

Furthermore, the work underway to review timetabling to allow discretion in making time available for curricular elements outside literacy and numeracy is long overdue and badly needed to achieve this objective 'balance'.

Table I.1 (1/2) **Snapshot of performance in reading, mathematics and science**

 Countries/economies with a mean performance/share of **top performers above** the OECD average
 Countries/economies with a share of **low achievers below** the OECD average
 Countries/economies with a mean performance/share of top performers/share of low achievers **not significantly different** from the OECD average
 Countries/economies with a mean performance/share of **top performers below** the OECD average
 Countries/economies with a share of **low achievers above** the OECD average

	Mean score in PISA 2018			Long-term trend: Average rate of change in performance, per three-year-period			Short-term change in performance (PISA 2015 to PISA 2018)			Top-performing and low-achieving students	
	Reading	Mathematics	Science	Reading	Mathematics	Science	Reading	Mathematics	Science	Share of top performers in at least one subject (Level 5 or 6)	Share of low achievers in all three subjects (below Level 2)
	Mean	Mean	Mean	Score dif.	Score dif.	Score dif.	Score dif.	Score dif.	Score dif.	%	%
OECD average	487	489	489	0	-1	-2	-3	2	-2	15.7	13.4
Estonia	523	523	530	6	2	0	4	4	-4	22.5	4.2
Canada	520	512	518	-2	-4	-3	-7	-4	-10	24.1	6.4
Finland	520	507	522	-5	-9	-11	-6	-4	-9	21.0	7.0
Ireland	518	500	496	0	0	-3	-3	-4	-6	15.4	7.5
Korea	514	526	519	-3	-4	-3	-3	2	3	26.6	7.5
Poland	512	516	511	5	5	2	6	11	10	21.2	6.7
Sweden	506	502	499	-3	-2	-1	6	8	6	19.4	10.5
New Zealand	506	494	508	-4	-7	-6	-4	-1	-5	20.2	10.9
United States	505	478	502	0	-1	2	8	9	6	17.1	12.6
United Kingdom	504	502	505	2	1	-2	6	9	-5	19.4	9.0
Japan	504	527	529	1	0	-1	-12	-5	-9	23.3	6.4
Australia	503	491	503	-4	-7	-7	0	-3	-7	18.9	11.2
Denmark	501	509	493	1	-1	0	1	-2	-9	15.8	8.1
Norway	499	501	490	1	2	1	-14	-1	-8	17.8	11.3
Germany	498	500	503	3	0	-4	-11	-6	-6	19.1	12.8
Slovenia	495	509	507	2	2	-2	-10	-1	-6	17.3	8.0
Belgium	493	508	499	-2	-4	-3	-6	1	-3	19.4	12.5
France	493	495	493	0	-3	-1	-7	2	-2	15.9	12.5
Portugal	492	492	492	4	6	4	-6	1	-9	15.2	12.6
Czech Republic	490	499	497	0	-4	-4	3	7	4	16.6	10.5
Netherlands	485	519	503	-4	-4	-6	-18	7	-5	21.8	10.8
Austria	484	499	490	-1	-2	-6	0	2	-5	15.7	13.5
Switzerland	484	515	495	-1	-2	-4	-8	-6	-10	19.8	10.7
Latvia	479	496	487	2	2	-1	-9	14	-3	11.3	9.2
Italy	476	487	468	0	5	-2	-8	-3	-13	12.1	13.8
Hungary	476	481	481	-1	-3	-7	6	4	4	11.3	15.5
Lithuania	476	481	482	2	-1	-3	3	3	7	11.1	13.9
Iceland	474	495	475	-4	-5	-5	-8	7	2	13.5	13.7
Israel	470	463	462	6	6	3	-9	-7	-4	15.2	22.1
Luxembourg	470	483	477	-1	-2	-2	-11	-2	-6	14.4	17.4
Turkey	466	454	468	2	4	6	37	33	43	6.6	17.1
Slovak Republic	458	486	464	-3	-4	-8	5	11	3	12.8	16.9
Greece	457	451	452	-2	0	-6	-10	-2	-3	6.2	19.9
Chile	452	417	444	7	1	1	-6	-5	-3	3.5	23.5
Mexico	420	409	419	2	3	2	-3	1	3	1.1	35.0
Colombia	412	391	413	7	5	6	-13	1	-2	1.5	39.9
Spain	m	481	483	m	0	-1	m	-4	-10	m	m

Figure 1: OECD (2019), *PISA 2018 Results (Volume I): What Students Know and Can Do*, PISA, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/5f07c754-en>.

3.4 CONTINUITY IN LEARNING FROM EARLY CHILDHOOD TO PRIMARY TO POST-PRIMARY

We note that this is being addressed through the NCCA's work on revising Aistear and the development of the Primary Curriculum Framework. IPPN looks forward to the publication of the document that accompanies the Primary Curriculum Framework, that is '*Supporting System-wide Primary Curriculum Change*', which outlines the conducive conditions necessary for the successful

implementation of the revised curriculum. Success can only be achieved if the system provides the necessary supports to achieve the aim of continuity of learning.

3.5 SUPPORTING DIVERSE LEARNERS TO ACHIEVE THEIR POTENTIAL

IPPN fully agrees with the point that *'some children need much greater levels of support to achieve their potential'*. However, truly inclusive education requires the necessary supports to be made available consistently to schools. Special needs are either met or they are not and, if not, there is a consequential impact not only on the child with special needs but also on the other children in the class. If the level of resources made available within the system are dictated by budgetary constraints then it cannot be claimed that special education educational needs are fully met. It can merely be asserted that special educational need is met only to the level allowed by the budget allocated for it.

Pillar 5 of the 2011-2020 National Strategy, 'Helping students with additional needs to achieve their potential' is another area that has not been achieved. The ongoing under-resourcing of NCSE and staffing issues in the role of SENO across the country, along with increased bureaucracy required of schools, has led to inadequate supports and very slow response to requests for exceptional reviews. SEN allocations, resourcing and appeals is the single biggest issue for schools, according to IPPN's National Council at its recent meeting in December 2022.

In relation to educational disadvantage, the focus of the Interim Review on children and young people experiencing educational disadvantage was welcomed, as was the inclusion of several hundred additional schools to the formal DEIS scheme in 2022. However, it has to be acknowledged that there are children from disadvantaged backgrounds in every school and additional supports must be made available to enable all schools to provide the extra support required for those children to help them to reach their full potential, in line with those available to pupils with similar needs in DEIS schools.

3.6 IMPROVING ASSESSMENT AND EVALUATION TO SUPPORT BETTER LEARNING IN LITERACY, NUMERACY AND DIGITAL LITERACY.

IPPN agrees that *'the appropriate use of assessment for learning (AfL) and assessment of learning (AoL) is an important aspect of teaching and learning practice. This also requires a clear statement of*

the learning outcomes that we expect children and young people to achieve at each stage in the education system. It is important that assessment information, including information about literacy, numeracy and digital literacy is used to inform school self-evaluation, reflective practices and school improvement plans.'

For this to become a reality, comprehensive CPD is required for school leaders and teachers to empower them to move towards AfL and AoL. This is also an opportunity for this to be included in SSE, SIPs and reflective practices. It is important to note that the requirement by the Department to report Standardised Test scores and the use of those reported scores in drawing up school profiles can be seen to work against a focus on reflection in schools.

3.7 DIGITAL LITERACY

IPPN agrees with the statement in the consultation discussion document that *'digital technology has become even more widespread'*, particularly since schools were forced to adapt to an online learning environment almost overnight at the start of the COVID pandemic. We also agree that *'The effective use of digital technology integrated as a seamless part of the teaching, learning and assessment practice in every classroom will be vital to successful implementation.'*

It is fair to say that digital platforms and tools have not been uniformly adopted and utilised by all schools. It depends to a large extent on the skills, training and attitudes of individual staff in schools and the supports available to them to implement and embed good practice. While there are templates and supports available, there has not been a coherent ICT-related professional development programme available to all teachers and school leaders in this area, nor has adequate ICT infrastructure and support been made available to all schools, and this remains the case in 2023. Providing grant funding to schools without a suite of training and appropriate supports limits the extent to which schools can embrace ICT and fully implement digital literacy programmes.

4 INTERNATIONAL CHARACTERISTICS

4.1 A LEVEL OF AUTONOMY FOR SCHOOLS AND TEACHERS, MATCHED WITH APPROPRIATE SUPPORT

We note this with interest and look forward to understanding what is implied by ‘a level of autonomy’ here.

While ‘*communities of practice and professional learning communities’ models of teacher professional development*’ are in place in some areas of the country, this has been very much led by individual schools, teachers and leaders and would require significant and systemic supports to be embedded in all schools.