



Leadership in Information and Communications Technology

Value for Money Review of the Schools Information Communications Technology (ICT) Support Service

Response by ICT Ireland

Introduction

In the years 1997-2003, significant progress was made by Government on the use of ICT in schools. The publication of 'IT 2000' in 1997, and the 'Blueprint for the future of ICT in education' in 2001 set the policy framework for the establishment of the National Centre for Technology in Education in 1998, and the appointment of twenty ICT advisors in the Education Centres from 1999.

However, no new strategy has been produced by the Department of Education since the expiry of the Blueprint in 2003. In order for the ICT in Schools programme, and the work of the NCTE to be effective, there needs to be a coherent and ongoing strategy and investment by the Department of Education in ICT in schools.

ICT Ireland welcomes this opportunity to contribute to the Value for Money Review of the Schools ICT Support Service. However, ICT Ireland feels that to be assessing the support service in isolation is irrational. To a great degree, it is dependent on the effectiveness or otherwise of the Technology Integration Initiative, and the policy on ICT in schools as set by the Department of Education. In the absence of any coherent, multi-year policy from the Department in the past three years, it is inevitable that the NCTE and the ICT support services have not been operating with maximum efficiency. The lack of multi-year policy, and the piecemeal nature of investments in ICT since 2003, has naturally made forward looking strategic planning difficult for ICT advisers and NCTE officials, particularly as they are not guaranteed that their position will continue from year to year. It has also led to inequities in the schools with regard to ICT. Where a school has a particularly committed teacher or principal, the schools may have some excellent projects in the use of ICT, but ICT Ireland feels that all schools should be in a position to develop and use innovative ICT projects.

ICT Ireland strongly recommends, therefore, that the Department of Education come forward with a coherent, multiyear policy on ICT in education. ICT Ireland and its member companies would be happy to work with the Department to provide advice and expertise.



Leadership in Information and Communications Technology

The National Centre for Technology in Education

The NCTE has done good work over the past eight years. The number of teachers trained by the NCTE stands to its credit, with over 80% of teachers receiving some form of ICT training. However, disappointingly few of these teachers have applied it in their teaching practice, because of the lack of follow through at school level. Suitable hardware has not been made available, despite the recent rollout of broadband to all schools, which serves to highlight the problem. Furthermore, the curriculum does not encourage the use of ICT, and the support structures are not in place. Many of the courses, while excellent courses in their own right, do not provide enough pedagogical background to enable teachers to create lesson plans for students. The NCTE has also produced some excellent digital content, particularly in conjunction with RTE on the IMMERSE project. However, much of the content on Scoilnet is not interactive, and does not differ greatly from written content. More content needs to be formulated which effectively uses web tools to encourage critical thinking and the development of higher order thinking skills.

The work of the NCTE should continue, but it should be more closely integrated with central educational policy. It would also be beneficial to the NCTE to liaise with stakeholders on a regular basis, perhaps along the lines of the NCCA committee structure.

ICT advisors network

The ICT advisors are an essential component of the work of the NCTE, providing local advice and training directly to the schools. This resource, therefore, needs to be used to maximum potential, and closely supervised by the NCTE itself. At present, the fact that ICT advisors are employed by the NCTE but managed largely by their local Education centre, which can sometimes lead to a blurring of the lines of responsibility. As the role of the ICT advisors evolve, it must be also ensured that ICT advisors have the correct skills set to help schools in terms of technical expertise, as well as training.

There is also a need for a stronger presence by the ICT advisors in the schools themselves. At present, most courses are run in the Education Centres. As mentioned above, relatively few teachers act on ICT training received by applying it to their teaching practice. If training could be provided in schools for teachers using their own school equipment, this would encourage teachers to put their training into practice.



Leadership in Information and Communications Technology

The National Council for Curriculum Assessment

ICT Ireland understands that the NCCA are currently finalising a Framework for ICT in the Schools. ICT Ireland would very much welcome the publication of such a document, particularly if it stresses the importance of ICT as a teaching tool, rather than as a standalone subject. Just as ICT has been integrated into our professional, personal and social lives, so ICT should be integrated into the learning process across the curriculum. Learning methods are changing. The traditional method whereby a teacher stands at the front of the class and imparts information, to be copied down and repeated back by the class, is being replaced by more project and course work, where students are encouraged to explore and discover for themselves. Technology is a powerful enabler for this type of learning.

Again, however, any such Framework by the NCCA must be backed up by coherent policy and substantial investment by the Department of Education to provide the infrastructure, training and support necessary to implement such a Framework.

Unless the Department of Education takes a leadership position and invests in a strategic and multiyear ICT policy to classrooms, it will have failed our students by depriving them of the skills necessary to succeed in a knowledge society.

In summary:

1. ICT Ireland feels that the Schools ICT Service cannot be examined out of context of a coherent, long term policy on ICT for the classroom.
2. Given that such a policy on ICT does not currently exist, ICT Ireland urges the Department of Education to adopt such a policy, in consultation with the School ICT Service, teachers and technology experts. This policy should encompass all aspects of ICT in education. Pedagogical rationale, and strategies for integrating and assessing the use of ICT in the classroom should be provided in the Framework for ICT being prepared in the NCCA. This must be complemented by policy on and investment in infrastructure, support and training by the Department of Education.
3. ICT in the classroom should be seen as a tool to foster learning across the curriculum, not as a standalone subject, and any policy on ICT in education should reflect this.

Note: ICT Ireland is the association which represents the information communication technology sector within IBEC.