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Publication of new evaluation report on digital technologies in schools by the Educational Research Centre (ERC)

The Educational Research Centre (ERC) has today published a report (*Digital Learning Framework (DLF) national longitudinal evaluation: One year on – Wave 1 report*) on the evaluation of the Department of Education's Digital Learning Framework (DLF).

The DLF is a key support of the Digital Strategy for Schools 2015-2020 to assist in the embedding of digital technologies into teaching, learning and assessment. A nationally representative sample of primary, post-primary and special schools were invited to participate in Wave 1 of the longitudinal evaluation, which followed one year after the baseline phase.

Two online surveys were administered between autumn 2019 and spring 2020, just prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Schools' digital learning team leaders or principals completed a survey and teachers in each sampled school were also invited to complete a survey.

Minister for Education Norma Foley TD said:

"I welcome the publication of today's ERC report on the implementation of the Digital Learning Framework in the school sector. The framework is a key curriculum support for schools, and now in its third year, feedback from the schools on its implementation to date is very positive.

"The Department is in the process of developing a new Digital Strategy for schools and a comprehensive consultative process is currently underway, to ensure that we hear the views of students, parents, teachers and all stakeholders. This process, together with the learnings from the ERC longitudinal study, will help inform some of the key objectives of the new strategy."

The study lead, Dr Jude Cosgrove, Chief Executive of the ERC, noted that:

"These results provide valuable information on the successes and challenges experienced by schools as they progress with embedding digital technologies in teaching, learning and assessment in accordance with the DLF. Wave 2, which will see surveys go to the same schools that took part in Wave 1, will provide an opportunity to understand how schools' use of digital technologies has developed and changed since the onset of COVID 19, and how this impacts on DLF implementation."

The results show that school leaders and teachers are highly engaged in professional development in digital technologies. Very large majorities of schools had policies and guidelines in place across a range of digital technology areas, and school leaders and teachers alike expressed very positive attitudes towards the use of digital technologies in teaching, learning and assessment.

Respondents identified five key enablers for embedding digital technologies, which are consistent with existing research in this area. The enablers emerged from an analysis of what respondents

wrote in their text responses to the surveys, and an empirical analysis that confirmed that multiple factors contribute simultaneously to successful implementation of the DLF in schools. These are:

- adequate levels of infrastructure and connectivity;
- effective technical support and maintenance;
- consultative and collaborative school leadership and high levels of collaboration among teachers;
- active promotion of and advocacy for the Digital Learning Plan in schools; and
- digital technology professional development that is sustained and tailored to local needs.

Results also show that there is considerable variation across schools, particularly at primary level, in perceived levels of digital technologies infrastructure and connectivity, as well as in the effectiveness of the technical support and maintenance in place.

The report highlights the challenges faced by smaller primary schools. Two of the report's authors, Emmet Feerick and Eva Moran, note:

"The results suggest that there is a critical mass of enrolment size of around 120 students, above which it may be easier to achieve high levels of infrastructure, strong connectivity, and effective technical maintenance and support. The results suggest that smaller primary schools face particular challenges in achieving their vision of embedding digital technologies into teaching, learning and assessment."

Welcoming the Department of Education's announcement in April 2021 of the development of a new Digital Strategy for Schools, along with consultation on the new Strategy, the authors note that the results of the Wave 1 DLF evaluation provide useful information for the development of the new Strategy. The report suggests that effective technical support and maintenance should be a priority for the new Digital Strategy for Schools, since currently, schools have different technical support arrangements in place (externally provided, internally provided, or a mixture). The report also suggests that the use of digital technologies in assessment is an area in need of further development.

Notes:

About the Digital Learning Framework longitudinal evaluation

The ERC is implementing this independent evaluation study on behalf of the Department of Education. The Digital Learning Framework evaluation is a longitudinal mixed methods study whose objective is to *evaluate the implementation of the Digital Learning Framework from the multiple perspectives of school Principals, digital learning team leaders, teachers and learners over a three-year period (2019-2022)*. The Wave 1 school sample of 150 primary schools, 100 post-primary schools and 32 special schools is drawn from the baseline school participants (1,524 primary schools, 320 post-primary schools, and 64 special schools). Within each sampled school, the digital learning team leader or Principal is invited to complete a school survey, and each teacher is invited to complete a teacher survey.

This same sample will be followed through to Wave 2, allowing a three-year perspective on the implementation and impacts of the DLF.

Priorities for Wave 2, commencing Autumn 2021, include:

- Gathering the views of young people on the use of digital technologies in teaching, learning and assessment
- Gathering schools' views on what supports should be prioritised in order to maintain and build on the initial successes of DLF implementation
- In the context of the DLF, explore the decision-making processes guiding schools' DT-related spending
- Investigating barriers and enablers to digital technology-based assessment in more depth.

About the forthcoming Digital Strategy for Schools

Minister Foley announced the development of a new Digital Strategy for schools in April 2021:

<https://www.education.ie/en/Press-Events/Press-Releases/2021-press-releases/PR21-04-05.html>

The announcement is accompanied by a consultation, including an open call for submissions, and surveys for Principals, teachers and students: <https://www.gov.ie/en/consultation/7d09a-digital-strategy-for-schools/>

More information and related reports

- Full DLF evaluation Wave 1 report: <http://www.erc.ie/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/DLF-W1-full-report.pdf>
- DLF evaluation Wave 1 report executive summary: <http://www.erc.ie/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/DLF-W1-executive-summary.pdf>
- DLF evaluation baseline report: <http://www.erc.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/DLF-national-evaluation-baseline-report.pdf>
- ERC DLF project page: www.erc.ie/dlf

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