

Interactive Classroom Working Group

School strategies for fostering students' digital competences

Practical guidelines for school leaders

Case Study

St. Nessian's National School, Limerick · Ireland



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Publisher: European Schoolnet (EUN Partnership AIBSL), Rue de Trèves, 61 – 1040 Brussels, Belgium

Author(s): Madeleine Murray, Oide Technology in Education

Editor(s): Konstantinos Andronikidis, European Schoolnet

Acknowledgements: Declan Kinnerk, Digital Learning Coordinator; Marie McKeogh, Principal

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Introduction

School digital strategies refer to the plans and frameworks developed by educational institutions to effectively integrate digital tools, technologies, and practices into the learning environment. Sustainable and inclusive digital education strategies require a balanced approach that considers diverse learner needs and promotes equitable access to technology. Rather than simply integrating new technologies in school practices, effective digital education strategies require a well-considered idea of how technology can improve educational outcomes, address inequalities, and support the wider educational mission of the school. It is a continuous process of identifying key priorities, allocating resources for targeted initiatives, monitoring progress, and achieving the different objectives.

This case study is one of 15 developed from interviews with members of school leadership teams who have contributed to the development of effective, sustainable, and inclusive school strategies to foster students' digital competence. The case studies focus on strategies that have successfully improved digitalisation of school and teaching practices and supported the development of digital competences in their students, in a sustainable and inclusive way. The schools are located in eight countries i.e. Czech Republic, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Portugal, Serbia, Slovenia, and Switzerland. The interviews were part of research carried out by European Schoolnet's Interactive Classroom Working Group on the schools' experiences, the lessons they have learnt and the good practice they have developed. This research has informed the development of the publication 'School strategies for fostering students' digital competences. Guidelines for school leaders'. Find the publication and other case studies here: <https://fcl.eun.org/icwg>

Introduction to Irish Context

Ireland's [Digital Strategy for Schools to 2027](#) builds on achievements and ambitions of its previous strategy. It aims to support the school system to ensure that all learners have the opportunity to gain the knowledge and skills needed to successfully navigate the digital world. The strategy was developed following a wide consultation process and it sets out high level objectives under three key pillars: (1) embedding digital technologies in teaching, learning and assessment, (2) digital technology infrastructure and policy and (3) research and digital leadership.

Every school is required to have a Digital Learning Plan, which is developed by following a six-step process (image below). As part of the process, the school sets up a digital learning team to lead and support the plan's development.

Digital learning resources and planning supports are provided by Oide Technology in Education (www.oidetie.ie) on behalf of the Department of Education in Ireland. These include bespoke in-school support (approximately 3,000 instances per year), online and face to face professional learning opportunities (approximately 10,000 teacher training places per year), good practice videos, and procurement advice and support. The DL Planning website (www.dlplanning.ie) provides an interactive Digital Learning Framework to help schools to develop their Digital Learning Plan.

Oide Technology in Education also manages the internet safety initiative Webwise (www.webwise.ie) and the national educational portal Scoilnet (www.scoilnet.ie).

GUIDELINES

Digital Learning Planning Cycle

The Digital Learning Planning Cycle consists of six steps. These steps provide a process for schools and individual teachers to engage in when reviewing and formulating a plan to enhance their DL practices.

The first three steps are the investigation phase while steps 4 to 6 focus on the creation, implementation and evaluation of the DL Plan.

For more information, click on each of the six steps in the Digital Planning cycle graphic.



Introduction to the school

St Nessian's Primary School is a Catholic ethos, publicly funded primary school, located in Limerick in Ireland. It caters to pupils for their 8 years of primary school, starting in junior infants and finishing in 6th class. It has 664 pupils and 52 staff, including a principal, deputy principal, 26 class teachers, 11 special education teachers (and one shared post), one English as an additional language (EAL) teacher and 8 special needs assistants. 12 teachers hold posts of responsibility (3 assistant principal Level 1

and 9 assistant principal Level 2) and there are 3 ancillary staff.

The focus of the current School Improvement Plan is literacy and numeracy, underpinned by wellbeing and digital technology in the classroom. The school engages in inhouse and external professional development, including participating in the [Oide Comhar programme](#) for leadership. Comhar is a fully funded Department of Education programme for middle leaders and explores the leadership themes of vision, culture, role, leadership of

learning and teaching, change, communication, conflict and sustainability. Teachers engage in in-service provided professional learning, such as the recent primary language curriculum and also in voluntary professional learning programmes and

Why this school as a case study?

This school was chosen as a case study for several reasons.

- ▣ Approach to Digital Learning Planning – in Ireland all schools are required to have a Digital Learning Plan, developed by following the Digital Learning Planning process and using the Digital Learning Framework (DLF). In addition to the Digital Learning Plan, there is an overall school development planning process, which uses the Department of Education’s Looking at our School Framework (LAOS 2022). St Nesson’s Primary School uses its Digital Learning Planning process to complement and support its school improvement plan, thus making the planning process more streamlined and also ensuring that digital learning priorities support the school’s curricular goals.

School leadership team & digital leadership

The principal of St Nesson’s Primary School is supported by three assistant principals (Level 1), who take specific responsibility for particular areas, including digital technologies. While these assistant principal posts are held by full-time classroom teachers, the school principal makes sure to provide the digital learning coordinator with time and cover in order for him to carry out his role effectively.

Vision-values of the school digital education strategy

The school’s vision as it relates to digital learning is:

‘St. Nesson’s Digital Learning Plan sets out how this school will maximise the potential for children’s learning using digital technologies, where appropriate. It is our aim that students will leave our school as confident, creative and productive users of digital technologies and

courses during the summer across many curricular areas, including digital technology. The school has also availed of in-school support focused on Digital Learning Planning, provided by Oide.

- ▣ Digital learning team – lead by the digital learning coordinator, there is a highly active digital learning team. The school principal is a participating member of the team and plays a significant role in supporting and leading digital learning in the school. They meet twice each term and also communicate regularly with the wider school staff and stakeholders.
- ▣ Digital technology for formative assessment – the school has used its involvement with the Oide Formative Assessment using Digital Portfolios project to enhance pupils’ access to digital devices and to help pupils to develop digital media literacy skills across every level in the school.

The digital learning coordinator leads and coordinates the work of the digital learning team and the development of the Digital Learning Plan. This is done in consultation with all staff, as well as pupils and other stakeholders. The digital learning team in this school is active and meets regularly during the school year to evaluate digital learning implementation and adjust the plan where required.

understand the impact of those technologies in the classroom and the wider community.’

The school also sees digital technology as an effective way to maintain and further develop home-school links and to communicate with parents. The school wishes to ensure that every child has access to a device for learning when they need it and that the use of these devices within the school

is planned, purposeful and aligned to the overall school teaching, learning and assessment goals.

The school recognises the importance of building leadership capacity and school leadership

Focus and aims

St Nesson's Digital Learning Plan strongly focuses on pupils' digital skills development, aligned with their vision for pupils to leave school having developed good digital competences. Moreover, a significant focus is put on using digital technology for creation, rather than consumption of digital content. There is also a strong emphasis on the potential of digital learning for inclusion and the school aims to harness the benefits of digital technology to make the curriculum more accessible to all children.

Teacher professional development is considered important to ensure that teachers can use digital technology meaningfully in the classroom. Following consultation with staff over recent years, it has been found that this is best done at an individual class level, so that teachers can collaborate, create and share resources that are specific to their class level and that can be tailored and adapted to their pupils' needs.

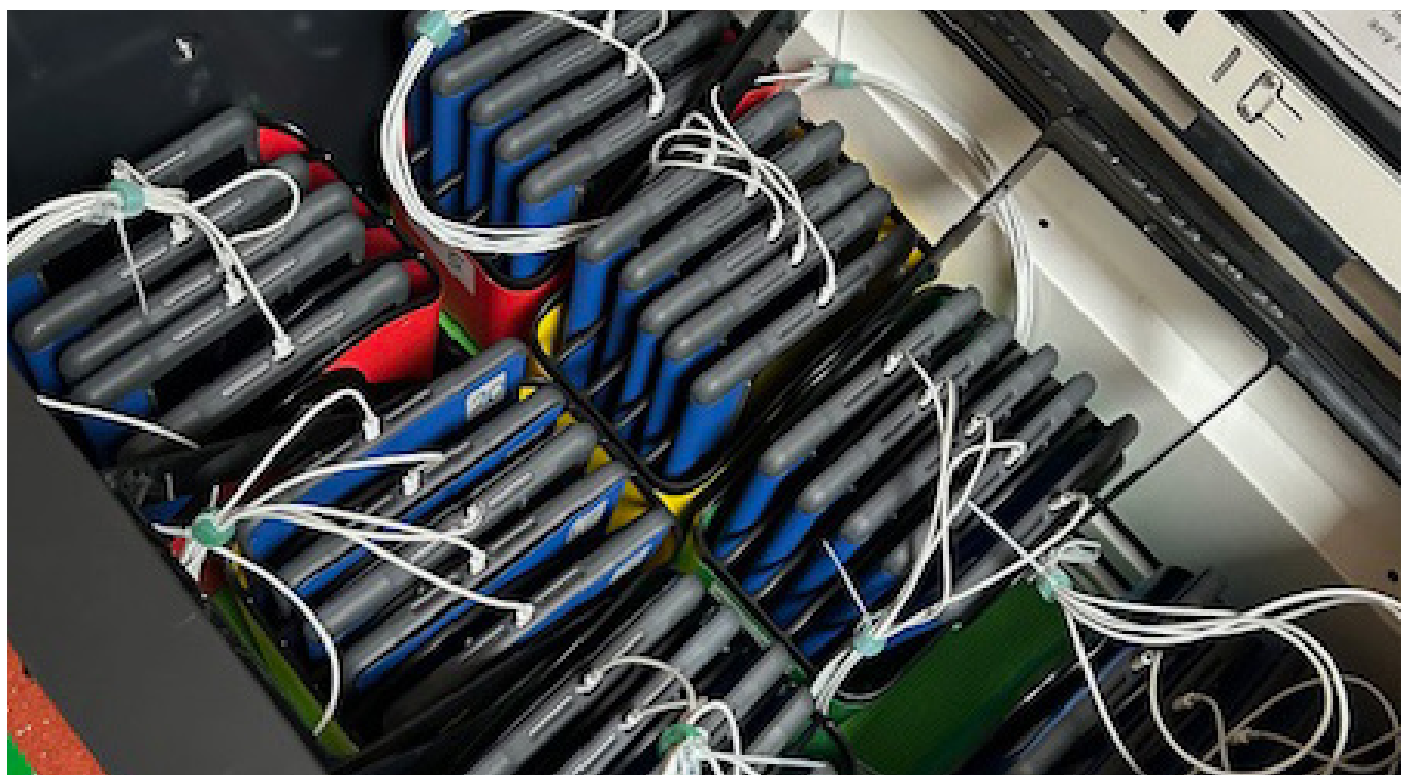
The school also sees the benefits of using digital technology for assessment, and is making some developments in this area, in particular in terms of providing feedback to pupils. It is supported in

empowers and supports teachers to oversee and implement key elements of the Digital Learning Plan

this endeavour by their participation in the Oide Formative Assessment using Digital Portfolios project.

The school participates in Safer Internet Day each year. The digital learning coordinator liaises with Webwise (www.webwise.ie), the internet safety centre managed by Oide on behalf of the Department of Education and disseminates all the relevant information about events and useful resources to class teachers. The student council also helps to promote online safety, going from class to class and raising awareness for Safer Internet Day.

Digital learning came to the fore in the school when Covid-19 came along with an urgent need to upskill teachers and pupils in the school platform (Seesaw was the platform in use at the time). However, this has evolved over the past four years with a very focused planning process for digital learning that has extended to a new school platform for the more senior classes. The Digital Learning Planning process now fully aligns with the process of school self-evaluation and school improvement planning.



Infrastructure and funding

As part of the digital planning process, two years ago, the digital learning team carried out an infrastructure audit, with the support of an external IT company. It highlighted where there were areas for improvement and areas that were working well. The results of this audit informed the leadership team that there were certain aspects of digital technology that were unreliable in the school, and therefore could not be depended on by teachers. These included broadband quality and wi-fi signals in certain classrooms. The school prioritised this area rather than devices initially.

Currently the school has interactive whiteboards in every classroom and, most classrooms also have a visualiser. Teachers have their own desktop computer in their classroom. Pupils with special educational needs have their own laptops. There are two iPad trolleys with a total of 91 iPads available (divided into a junior and senior trolley). There is also a recently purchased trolley of 30 Chromebooks available. The school has an effective system of booking the devices which ensures that they are shared across all classrooms.

Role of AI and other emerging technologies

In terms of AI, so far, individual teachers have experimented with AI, and in many cases teachers are using AI to help plan lessons and adapt and create resources for the curriculum. Both members of the leadership team interviewed expressed an interest in exploring the capabilities of AI to support assessment practices. However, the school is very much at the exploratory stage with AI at this point. In line with the Digital Learning Plan, the school plans to research opportunities for AI to support their overall goals and objectives, but this will be done in a planned and phased manner, with the digital learning team trialling and assessing relevant tools before they are used on a wider scale by all staff.

The school recently engaged in a coding initiative where students had the opportunity to engage with a local company called Analogue Devices, which

There is also a system for logging faults. Through its planning and booking systems the school aims to ensure that all pupils have access to a device when they need it to achieve specific learning objectives. It was emphasised that the use of the devices and particular software is focused on the learning needs and objectives of the school. There is a strong focus on the use of school-provided devices for learning. Pupils are not allowed to bring their own smartphones to their classrooms.

The school is part of the national Schools Broadband Programme, managed by Oide, which provides free, filtered broadband to every school in the country. Infrastructure is managed by the digital learning coordinator with the support of the digital learning team. When needed, a contracted IT company provides additional technical support. The student digital committee also helps with the management of devices.

Funding for infrastructure comes via a Department of Education grant, and the school also receives generous contributions from Parents' Association fundraising.

was considered of great benefit to the students participating. The school principal is very keen to engage in future partnerships with local companies to enhance the school's digital learning goals and practice, and to explore what opportunities might arise in engaging with new and emerging technologies.

During the school visit, there was a lot of evidence of technologies being used to support pupils' learning. A project on sustainability was observed where students used Chromebooks and specifically the applications Jamboard, Wakelet and Canva to engage in brainstorming, research and the creation of an interactive poster on the topic of sustainability. The pupils seemed experienced in using these tools and demonstrated creativity in the design of posters and other resources on the topic.

Added value and impact

There is a clear recognition by school leadership of the value and positive impact that digital technology has had on the school as well as its potential for future development. The Digital Portfolios initiative for example has enabled pupils to upload and catalogue evidence of their work digitally at all levels, using Seesaw for junior classes and Google Workspace for senior classes.



Teachers record feedback that prompts the pupils to reflect and improve their learning. This has been an area that has shown much promise in recent times and has the potential to further develop according to the school leadership team.

Although not the focus of this case study, it is notable that the incoming pupils (approximately five-year-olds) are actively engaged in digital skills development.

This is an initiative that the school principal feels strongly about, as pupils are developing essential digital skills which will impact positively on their journey through school and into senior classes.

Challenges

Both the school principal and the digital learning coordinator identified challenges in the embedding of digital learning in their school. One of these is planning for the purchase of devices as this can be difficult due to uncertainty about when the school will receive grant funding. Recent funding was used to make some upgrades to the school's wi-fi, with the installation of additional access points

The digital learning coordinator issues a newsletter to school stakeholders three times a year with updates relating to digital learning.

This is a key communication as it celebrates the school's successes with digital technology as well as highlighting future developments. Many sponsorships and fundraising activities have

been the result of the information shared in this publication as it has shown the benefits of digital technologies to stakeholders, including parents.

The school digital learning team regularly reviews the aims and objectives of its Digital Learning Plan and consults widely on its future direction. The school avails of sustained in-school support by Oide and the principal ensures that the digital learning coordinator can attend relevant CPD events that will help to develop the school's approach to embedding digital learning.

throughout the school; the purchase of 30 new Chromebooks, a 'Joey 30' Trolley to charge and store the Chromebooks, management licences as well as replacement devices, including iPads and interactive whiteboards.

The digital learning coordinator mentioned time as being an issue. He is very conscious of not asking too much of teachers who are already extremely busy

with new curricula being rolled out and the many demands of teaching, including integration of EAL pupils. Having an understanding of the demands on teachers and trying not to increase the burden on them was mentioned by both interviewees as an important ingredient in developing a positive digital learning culture within the school.

This challenge has been somewhat overcome however by engaging in one-to-one consultations with teachers and providing informal CPD sessions aimed at particular class levels. There is very good willingness amongst teachers to engage in areas that will benefit their teaching practices. The digital

Sustainability and improvement of strategy

The sustainability of the digital learning development process in the school is achieved currently by having a very active Digital Learning Planning process, a Digital Learning Plan which is continually reviewed and updated and a strong leadership team consisting of an effective digital learning team, a digital learning coordinator, and key support and leadership provided by the school principal.

The Digital Learning Plan's focus on supporting the aims of the school improvement plan is key to its sustainability. Effective communication of the plan's vision, goals and objectives it strives to achieve is also important.

Consultation with stakeholders is an ongoing element of the planning process, with feedback carefully being considered. The digital learning team presents regularly at staff meetings and meets twice each term to review progress, discuss issues, and make plans for the coming term.

The Digital Learning Framework mapping to the school self-evaluation process was mentioned several times as a strength from a policy perspective. The digital learning team in St. Nesson's felt much more confident engaging with the Digital Learning Framework after having been through cycles of school self-evaluation, using a similar process. The school has found a good balance in linking both processes and connected them to its overall objectives.

Staff buy-in is very good, and the commitment of the digital learning team to provide individual support to teachers has helped teachers to engage

learning team was complimented many times by both the school principal and the digital learning coordinator as being very active and supportive of all teachers.

The digital learning coordinator also mentioned the time required to conduct his role effectively as being somewhat challenging. However the support from the school leadership in allocating him time to carry out his role helps to address this.

Reliability of broadband and wi-fi can be problematic, with some frustrations expressed by teachers from time to time. This is something the school is continually trying to improve upon.

meaningfully with digital technologies for learning, teaching and assessment.

The school has benefited from in-school (sustained) support visits provided by Oide. This bespoke support has helped them to fine tune the goals of their Digital Learning Plan and to identify some external supports that they can avail of to support their plans.

The school's participation in the Oide Formative Assessment using Digital Portfolios project has enabled it to put in place a system which ensures continuity from junior to senior classes and has enabled pupils to self-reflect on their learning and engage meaningfully with digital technology.

St Nesson's continues its digital learning journey, with future plans to explore AI and other emerging technologies, to learn from other schools and to engage in further professional learning opportunities in digital technology in order to achieve its vision of pupils having the skills and competences to engage confidently with digital technology by the time they leave the school.

The case study complements the European Schoolnet's publication 'School strategies for fostering students' digital competences. Guidelines for school leaders'.

Find the publication and other case studies at fcl.eun.org/icwg



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