



the National Parent Forum of Scotland

Consultation on the development of a Digital Learning and Teaching Strategy for Scotland

Q1. Is the strategy founded on the right principles?

The National Parent Forum of Scotland agrees that the strategy is founded on the right principles. The key issue is how digital technology can contribute to raising attainment for all and closing the equality gap, so it is vital that equality of access is kept at the forefront of the strategy, in order to ensure that all children and young people are supported to achieve their full educational potential. There is a particular opportunity within the strategy to address the needs of children and young people with additional support needs, as digital learning can enable them to fully access the curriculum and achieve improved outcomes.

However, it is essential that the strategy is joined-up with other key policies, particularly Developing the Young Workforce with its emphasis on understanding and reflecting current and projected labour market needs. There is a need for increased engagement with commerce and industry so that the strategy is informed by an understanding of what the most current and effective digital skillsets are.

Q2. Are the four key themes identified the right ones to focus on?

We support the key themes, but believe there is a key omission – engagement with parents. The strategy needs to be much more ambitious in how it envisages parents' role, and should address the need to support parents so that they can understand and encourage their children's use of technology for learning. Supporting parents' ICT skills and confidence will also enable them to be more informed and play an effective role in their child's education. Parents have differing needs, and some groups of parents may face particular barriers in relation to accessing and understanding ICT, for instance parents affected by poverty. 'Parents' encompasses all those with parenting responsibilities including, for example, grandparents who are kinship carers, who may be very unfamiliar with current technology.

Although we welcome the strategy's focus on equity, there is a need to fully address the needs of children and young people who do not have access to adequate technology at home, and/or whose parents lack skills and confidence in

using technology. The strategy's ambitions on fairness and equity cannot be achieved if these inequalities are not adequately addressed. The most recent Scottish Household Survey found that 20% of households are still without internet access, rising to 31% in areas of high deprivation (Scottish Government, 2014).

In addition to unequal access to technology in the home, we also have concerns about unequal access to technology within school, particularly for children with additional support needs. There is considerable variation across the country with regards to the availability of digital and technological resources. We support the views expressed by Enquire, the national advice service for additional support for learning, in relation to this. Enquire highlighted the problems that parents of learners with additional support needs have reported to them regarding the use of ICT in schools, including:

- Schools stating they do not have funding to provide a piece of equipment or teachers/support assistants who are trained to use it;
- Equipment (including laptops and iPads) not being used in class or being used inappropriately;
- Disagreements about whether equipment or programmes used at home can also be used in school;
- Negative attitudes of teachers towards the use of specific types of technology for support learning

We would also agree with the point raised in Children in Scotland's submission about the need for digital learning to have a focus on staying safe online, which should address issues faced by young people such as cyber bullying and intimate image abuse.

Q3. Do you agree with the priorities for action outlined in the 'leaders' theme?

Our view is that effective leadership is essential in order to drive forward improvement and increased investment in digital technology, and to ensure that digital learning is regarded as essential, and not as an optional extra.

Digital learning should feature prominently in initial teaching training and CPD to ensure that children, in particular those with additional support needs, can be adequately supported in their use of digital technology. There should be greater awareness among teachers and headteachers of the support and advice, both local and national, available for supporting children's needs. For instance, CALL Scotland provides a range of digital learning solutions such as Books for All (digitised text books, which all teachers can access with a password) and digitised SQA exams. Anecdotally, we have heard from our ASN subgroup that very few teachers are aware of these resources. If there was greater awareness

and take-up, this could help pupils unlock their educational potential and could make a considerable contribution to improving outcomes and closing the attainment gap.

Q4. Do you agree with the priorities for action outlined in the 'access' theme?

Solutions must be found for children without access to technology at home so that they are able to undertake research, complete their homework and assignments in the evenings, weekends and during school holidays, otherwise there is a risk that educational inequalities will be further entrenched.

School librarians play an important role in delivering digital learning, as well as contributing to literacy programmes and encouraging self-directed learning, which is one of the features of Curriculum for Excellence. Despite this, many school libraries have been badly affected by local authority education budget cuts. Over 12 Scottish local authorities have either already approved or are currently considering proposals which would cut the numbers of school librarians, or result in their roles being reduced. The Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals in Scotland has described school libraries as "standing on the edge of a cliff" and have stated that local authorities have failed to understand school libraries' contribution to educational attainment. The EIS has stated that school librarians are "the linchpins of school literacy programmes".¹

Public libraries, another vital resource for accessing ICT and digital learning, are also under threat of closure as a result of local authority budget cuts. For instance, Fife has approved the closure of 16 libraries². It is difficult to see how the attainment gap can be addressed when there is a fundamental issue about children's unequal access to technology and digital learning.

There are also considerable issues around infrastructure, specifically broadband access. Many schools across Scotland have insufficient broadband capacity to deliver digital learning. If this issue is not addressed, it risks undermining the entire digital learning strategy. However, as stated above, local authorities are now entering their third year of spending cuts, and realistically it is questionable as to whether digital learning and technology will be regarded as a priority.

The issue of Glow also needs to be addressed as it is undervalued and underused in many schools. If Glow is to continue to be invested in, then it is important that any technical or attitudinal barriers to its use are resolved.

¹ Cited in

http://www.heraldscotland.com/opinion/13801268.School_library_cuts_should_be_stamped_out/

² <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-edinburgh-east-fife-35039842>

Q5. Do you agree with the priorities for action outlined in the 'curriculum and assessment' theme?

Yes, although we would recommend that the views of children, young people and parents are taken into full account as part of the proposed work with stakeholders to review digital technology in Curriculum for Excellence.

There is a need for consultation and a shared agreement between teachers, decision-makers, pupils and parents about the value and importance of digital learning, and the safe and effective use of technology.

Q6. Do you agree with the priorities for action outlined in the 'teachers' theme?

In order to successfully implement the strategy, it is necessary for teachers to have the skills and confidence to use ICT appropriately and effectively. We refer to the points made above under Q3 about initial teacher training and CPD.

Q7. Would you be willing to share your experiences of digital learning and teaching with us?

NPFS would be happy to share parents' experiences of digital learning and the steps that need to happen in order to help the strategy achieve its full potential. We engage with parents using a variety of communication channels, including focus groups, local and national events, surveys, e-newsletters, our parent database, website and social media. Please contact Barbara Schuler, Policy Manager, at policymanager@npfs.org.uk to discuss further.

Q8. Is there anything else you wish to add about this strategy?