



Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI) opening statement to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Skills on the topic of back to school costs.

September 2019

On behalf of Education and Training Boards Ireland, and the 16 Education and Training Boards (ETBs) that ETBI represents, I am very pleased to make this statement to the Joint Committee for Education and Skills on the Education and Skills and contribute to the review on the range of impacts on Back to School Costs.

ETBs are statutory authorities which have responsibility for education and training, youth work and a range of other statutory functions. ETBs manage and operate community national schools, second-level schools, further education colleges, and a range of adult and further education centres in communities throughout Ireland.

While our written submission highlights our views and concerns as a sector, we would like to reference some overarching points relating to the specific areas aligned to the committee's review.

The advantages and disadvantages of Textbook Rental Schemes in Schools

In relation to the issues surrounding Textbook Rental Schemes, our ETB schools have a long history of supporting the operation of such a scheme throughout the sector, providing access to schoolbooks at a significantly lesser cost than if books were purchased individually by student. The schemes are operated in many different formats, through staff administration and sometimes in cooperation with the schools' Parents Council, which supports and enhances the partnership between school and parents/guardians.

As noted in our submission the scheme operates with relative success giving students access to relevant books at a reduced cost, ensuring ongoing access to avoid disrupting learning which can subsequently support attendance and inclusion.

There are of course challenges associated with operating a Book Rental Scheme which can impact both financially and administratively on the individual school. For a school to establish a scheme requires significant capital costs, with the result of recouping those costs taking a number of years to materialise. Administratively, maintaining a quality and up to date scheme places significant demands on staff resources while the storage space required can come at a premium, particularly given the ever-increasing demands for specific purpose teaching and learning spaces.

The use of technology for educational purposes

As we continue to be enveloped and engaged by an ever-increasing technological existence, there is no doubt that the impact and influence of technology, in all its formats, permeates our school environments. In a formal way the new Junior Cycle curriculum, in particular, incorporates a digital focus for the eight key skills which elevates its purpose away from a traditional 'bolt on' approach towards a more appropriate 'built in' model.

The need for digital skills has never been more relevant, supporting learning tasks, the development of autonomous learners and research skills while also offering the opportunity to explore and expand assessment approaches and opportunities for reflection.

Some of the practical disadvantages have been obvious from the outset – digital learning can be an expensive option. Rapid changes in technology often require frequent updates and when coupled with challenges such as inconsistent broadband and Wi-Fi coverage, lack of technical and digital expertise both in school and at home, the technological experience can become one of great demands.

We also cannot ignore the increasing discomfort at the rate of change and unexpected impacts as the use and influence of the various technologies become embedded in our schools. While

the school environment may provide a space for shared learning and upskilling, many parents and guardians find their own lack of knowledge a further challenge when trying to navigate the digital space inhabited by their children.

The possible necessity of parents/guardians to resort to moneylenders in order to meet the basic costs of educating their children

The ETBI input on the necessity of parents/guardians having to resort to moneylenders to meet the basic costs of educating their children, might be noted to be the shortest aspect of its written submission. This brevity in no way reflects our lack of thought on the potential stresses of parents and guardians in this area, but rather highlights the stigma that may be associated with having to resort to moneylenders.

Our written submission references the difficulty ETBI has in providing evidence from the sector based on the fact that parents or guardians are unlikely to share this information or their experiences with the school Principal. This does not mean that our Principals and schools are not sensitive to any potential financial difficulties and would at all times encourage parents and guardians to share these challenges, where they can. Our Principals and our school staff always endeavour to provide guidance towards any local and national services which might have the capacity to further support individual families.

In conclusion, we would like to thank you for inviting ETBI to engage with the Committee on these issues and the varying impacts and experiences that are reflective of the ETB sector.