



JMB Opening Statement on Textbook Rental and Educational Technologies to the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Education and Skills

Thank you for this opportunity to address the Joint Committee on these important issues.

Textbooks

Firstly, on book costs, no-one can argue against offering support to families in accessing school textbooks and our schools have been providing low, and no-cost supports in a dignified manner to families for many years.

The problem, however, lies with the resources schools receive in the first place.

In 2011/12, the then Minister published a Code of Practice in respect of publishers and set out to protect funding for book grants to schools in that, recessionary, academic year. The publication of a subsequent Report and Guidelines were welcomed and challenged schools of all kinds to consider the supports available to families and to take stock of new ideas and good practice already in place in so many settings.

There nonetheless remain serious challenges to be overcome in respect of equity and implementation.

It is the recommendation of JMB that we return to an application model, rather than the universal, per-capita model the Department currently operates. Though this would add to the administrative burden of school principals it would nonetheless better reflect the local student population and allow for a more proportionate allocation of funds, particularly to DEIS schools.

Schools operate a range of models in distributing book-grant monies ranging from discreet, targeted individual support to voucher systems, second-hand book sales and rental schemes. It is essential that school autonomy be retained in this process as identifying need is best left to our schools who really get to know their families.

JMB recommends that schools commencing the operation of school rental schemes be given a capital grant to purchase the initial tranche of textbooks and to provide for the additional infrastructural investment required to set up such a scheme. Even buying 400 cardboard boxes for student's book-sets represents a significant cost, not to mention shelving, stationery etc. The

abolition of such an initial grant, which existed in the past, represents a failure to accept current financial realities for schools and of families.

JMB is happy to play its part in encouraging school management to establish rental schemes. The staffing demands of such schemes, however, will require reliable engagement on the part of parents as the current staffing of schools doesn't have the capacity to do this work.

In addition, the prohibition on using grant monies for *e*-books is discouraging schools with digital or mixed-medium texts from even considering book rental schemes and JMB urges the Department to reconsider this barrier. Meanwhile, removing the unreasonable imposition of VAT on *e*-books as with paper textbooks would represent a good initial step.

In any event, ongoing changes in the profile of textbooks required under the new Junior Cycle continue to discourage large numbers of schools from investing in a book rental scheme.

Technologies

The current Digital Strategy for Schools, while welcome, is not an end in itself. We have, however, been focused for too long on hardware, software, networks etc. Serious teachers will always maintain a focus on pedagogy. Our investment should concentrate there.

The core business of a school is not teaching and learning, it's teaching *for* learning. Everything a school does must have a learning focus and this, in the current technological revolution, must begin with the teacher.

Technology does not substitute for good teaching – it amplifies it. The spectrum of digital expertise amongst teachers is very wide and teachers urgently need to be equipped to use and create digital classroom materials customized to their particular students' needs. Students also will generate content – indeed it will be impossible to stop them, and great things are already happening in Irish schools.

Cost effective models of integrating technologies into teaching are also now emerging, so it's not always about buying expensive tablets. BYOD – 'bring you own device' models are working very well in many schools and it would be helpful if PDST Technology in Education could find out what's working well and cost-effectively in schools and share these ideas with everyone.

We wish the Oireachtas Committee well in its consideration of these important issues and look forward to our conversation here today and to the eventual Report.

John Curtis, JMB General Secretary

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