NASUWT submission to Scrutiny – Digital Skills

The Vision for IT in Education document establishes some sound principles upon which an effective strategy for the use of technology in education might be taken forward. In particular, the NASUWT welcomes the commitment by the States to invest resources in the establishment of an effective IT infrastructure for the Island's education system, the recognition of the importance of effective support frameworks for teachers and school leaders and the need to provide high quality IT-related training and professional development for the school and college workforce.

However, while the Vision document sets out the aims, purposes and values that the States intends should underpin the development of policy in this critical area, it is clear that work will now need to be taken forward to develop a coherent strategic plan for the deployment and use of IT in the Island's schools and colleges. As the largest teachers union in Jersey, the NASUWT is uniquely placed to ensure that the development of this plan is guided effectively by the perspectives, experiences and expertise of the workforce. The Union therefore looks forward to further engagement with the States and with the Digital Scrutiny Sub-panel as this agenda progresses.

The NASUWT is clear that effective approaches to the use of IT to support teaching and learning must be based on a clear understanding of the range of different ways that IT is used within schools and colleges. It is possible to identify three broad categories of use of ICT within the education system:

- to support whole-school administration and management;
- to support teachers and other members of the school workforce in undertaking their professional activities; and
- to support pupils' learning.

IT used to support whole-school administration and management can play an important role in the development of effective approaches to teaching and learning. In particular, IT can represent an effective means of managing the collation, analysis and utilisation of school-level data. However, the increased use of IT for this purpose can risk the development of a data culture in schools in which significant quantities of data are gathered, stored and disseminated without a clear sense of why such data is being collected or how it should be used and analysed effectively. It is therefore essential that provisions are put in place as part of a broader IT strategy that ensure that existing data is used more purposefully and does not add to the bureaucratic and workload burdens of headteachers, teachers and other members of the school workforce.

IT also has the potential to support teachers and other staff in their work to meet the learning needs of individual pupils. Computerised report-writing systems and other innovations designed to make planning and assessment of progress more streamlined and rational can not only help to tackle teacher workload but can also ensure that teachers are in possession of richer and more useful data upon which to base decisions about the needs of individual learners.

However, it is essential that IT is used appropriately in this respect, particularly in relation to the work/life balance of teachers and headteachers. There is evidence that the increasing potential for teachers to use IT to work remotely beyond school could lead to pressures for teachers and headteachers to use time after school, weekends and school holidays to undertake additional work that should be planned for and resourced during the normal working day. Therefore, instead of teachers and headteachers being able and encouraged to work smarter there is the potential for technology to be used to require them to work even harder and longer, leading to the creation of unacceptable workload burdens, undermining their entitlements in respect of work/life balance and hindering work to exert downward pressure on excessive working hours.

In addition, approaches must be developed that avoid the implementation of initiatives based on 'remote learning' with teachers providing feedback and input to learners outside school hours through the use of e-mail, social media or web-based communication systems.

The potential for IT to be used as a support for more personalised approaches to teaching and learning needs to be developed coherently. It is beyond dispute that IT skills are necessary to prepare pupils for important economic, social, civic and cultural dimensions of modern life. It is also clear that IT can facilitate the development of innovative teaching strategies that would not be possible without the effective use of technology.

Feedback from NASUWT members working in the UK and elsewhere suggests that teachers in some circumstances feel forced to use expensive new technology in order to justify its purchase when an alternative pedagogic approach might be more effective. There is therefore a genuine risk that educational provision can become technology-led in such circumstances, with the needs of learners and the discretion of teachers to determine approaches to meeting these needs rendered as subordinate considerations. It is essential that the States works to ensure that steps are taken to avoid such an approach becoming embedded within the education system in Jersey.

NASUWT's work in this area has also highlighted issues related to the reliability of IT equipment. While the reliability of hardware has improved significantly, schools can still face a number of problems in this respect. Of particular concern can be the degree of variability in the levels and quality of technical support offered to schools in maintaining and upgrading resources and repairing equipment. This can be compounded by the lack of help some schools receive in making appropriate purchasing decisions. Ensuring that an effective support infrastructure is established will be critical to the effective development and implementation of the States' vision for IT in education.

The reliability, extent and quality of IT resources in schools is dependent on significant levels of public investment. The NASUWT therefore welcomes the recognition by the States of the importance of this in the development of its strategy. Nevertheless, thought will need to be given to how the upgrading of existing resources will be provided for in the medium to long term. IT resources become obsolete, and therefore less relevant to learners, relatively quickly and five-year hardware replacement cycles have become standard practice in both private and public sector organisations. It is essential the the States works to develop detailed proposals that will ensure that IT resources remain fit for purpose within a context of rapid technological change.