Better Literacy and Numeracy for Children and Young People

A Draft National Plan to Improve Literacy and Numeracy in Schools

Response by the Teachers’ Union of Ireland

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Introduction

A national plan to improve literacy and numeracy in schools is overdue. For some years there have been explicit policy commitments to improve educational achievement and specific targets to address literacy difficulties were set out in the national anti-poverty strategy (2002). Notwithstanding the implementation of a wide number of distinct and sometimes complementary measures to improve educational achievement levels over the years, a comprehensive, wide ranging strategy aimed specifically at improving literacy and numeracy levels across the system represents a significant landmark in Irish education provision.

TUI understands written responses to the draft plan represent the first phase of consultation on the ideas under consideration by the Department of Education and Skills. This will be followed by further public consultation events and meetings with stakeholders. Therefore, the points set out below reflect initial observations and thoughts by TUI. They will be developed further as the consultation process deepens and the actions being proposed come under closer examination as to their relevance, appropriateness and how they might translate into practice. The union’s expertise rests at post-primary, further education and third level so feedback at this stage concentrates primarily, but not solely, on the ideas and actions that refer to provision at post-primary level. The deeper expertise of other organisations in relation to the provision of early education and primary education is acknowledged and many of their ideas supported in principle. Comments at this initial stage are set out under:
Introduction - Definitions, Targets and Actions

**Definitions**
What do we mean by literacy and numeracy? In the introduction to the draft plan a broad, insightful and modern definition of literacy and numeracy is presented as the focus, but is quickly replaced by a more limited and confined approach. Developing literacy clearly refers to one language only. This is not a realistic reflection of European and national policy perspectives on language development and education, nor does it reflect current practice and context in Irish schools.

In addition, the development of digital literacy does not receive sufficient attention. Yet basic competence in digital literacy is central to modern communication and has potential to support language and numeracy development and deeper learning. As the plan evolves actions and targets must embrace the widest, most modern approach to developing and improving standards in literacy and numeracy. They must reflect the complexities of the multi-lingual context as well as the technological digital age in which we now operate.

**Setting Targets and Actions**
TUI acknowledges the need to identify areas for review to improve literacy and numeracy levels, as is the need for clear actions and realistic targets. There is no doubt a
concerted national effort is now needed and a multi-faceted approach is required to address the full range of factors and issues that affect student engagement, progress and achievement. Therefore, it is disappointing that the invitation from the Tánaiste and the document as a whole seem to locate the issue of improving standards almost exclusively in the domain of teaching. Targets and actions are directed primarily towards schools, teachers and teaching. There is little reference to the ‘agency’ and disposition of learners.

In addition, the plan fails to flag in a sufficient or meaningful manner that educational achievement and progress is heavily dependent on a multiplicity of out-of-school factors. These factors have their foundation in deep rooted societal, structural and systems’ issues. In some instances they have quite a negative impact on the school experience and progress of students or of whole communities. A strategy designed to bring about real improvement for all students should address these hurdles in a more forthright manner.

Targets set out in the draft plan are wide ranging and somewhat ambitious. Some are achievable if adequately supported and resourced. Areas for review and target setting should, of course, be ambitious. They should also be brave. Of note, therefore, is the absence of any overarching targets to move towards a more equitable system of education which has proven to have positive long-term effects on performance levels and diminishes wide variation in achievement. Any discussion on how to improve literacy and numeracy should highlight equity and equality of opportunity as key to improving system-wide educational outcomes. It follows that targets should be set in this regard. At minimum a true dialogue should begin. Disappointingly, apart from acknowledging the need to have a special focus on disadvantage and particular interest groups, there is little evidence in the draft plan of a commitment to bringing about a more equitable education system in Ireland.

In respect of many of the targets identified the real challenge will be how we set about achieving them. Ideas set out under ‘We will need to’ again reflect a lack of attention to the bigger issue of inequity and deep inequality within the system. The primary focus
appears to be the introduction of intensive ‘literacy and numeracy’ proofing into policy commitments and operational measures already in place and the establishment of a high-level group to drive implementation. At times the actions in the draft plan come across as re-active and rash at systems’ level. However, a commitment to promoting a whole-school effort is conveyed and this is important. TUI can lend some support to many of the ideas listed. Its concerns lie primarily in how these will be brought into effect, how they will be supported and how they will be resourced.

Improving Teachers’ Professional Practice

Initial Teacher Education (ITE)

Professional practice is key and some review and adaptation may be appropriate to strengthen attention to literacy and numeracy development among children and young people. The draft plans notes that Ireland has been fortunate to attract some of the most highly qualified young people into the teaching profession. However, in respect of the teaching of literacy and numeracy it raises issues about competence and confidence levels among primary teachers. It suggests a review of entry requirements for ITE to emphasise literacy and numeracy, ‘including in the case of primary teaching the potential raising of the minimum grades in mathematics’.

A review of entry requirements may be valid. TUI believes this demands a revision of the points system which has become a crude measure for selection into third level education and has a negative influence on post-primary schooling. Growing evidence that teaching and learning is over-directed by the state examinations, even as early as second year, is of significance in this regard (ESRI, pending publication). The points system appears fair in that those with highest points get first option. In reality it may be a poor measure of suitability for certain vocations or professions including teaching. The system, as we know it, may have done its time: creative, realistic and relevant approaches are required to support future selection for ITE programmes.
Quick and surface solutions must be avoided. A rationale for raising the minimum grade in mathematics must be clear and justified in terms of what this is expected to denote and achieve. Likewise, aligning bonus points to maths should be avoided. This will only serve to inflate entitlement by some to a place in ITE above others who may in fact be better suited to teaching. Similarly, in terms of entry to the Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) TUI urges balance in the approach to identifying prospective teachers. It notes an over-emphasis by some colleges in recent years on entry by those who have the highest honours awards at degree level. However, they may not make the best or even good teachers.

Teacher qualifications, expertise and skills are important at all levels of education. Clearly all primary school teachers should have high capacity to teach literacy and numeracy and language skills. The potential of an extended Bachelor of Education (B.Ed) programme for primary teaching or the discontinuation of some academic subjects in favour of others to improve attention to literacy, numeracy or pedagogical knowledge may have merit.

Extending the duration of the PGCE (consecutive model, post-primary) to two years may provide more time to develop important knowledge, expertise and capacity among new teachers. This may be especially valid with regard to integrating the teaching of literacy and numeracy across subjects and implementing assessment approaches designed to measure and define progress. The extension of the B.Ed (concurrent model, post-primary) to more subjects may also prove useful. In tandem, providing opportunities for school-based teaching practice in the classrooms of high quality experienced teachers of literacy and numeracy may be worthwhile. A requirement to demonstrate satisfactory skills in teaching literacy and numeracy during teaching practice may also have merit.

However, all these ideas will require detailed examination as to how and when they could realistically come into effect. It is difficult to see how the time lines identified are realistic. In the first instance, the construction of revised or new PGCE and B.Ed
programmes will require very careful attention. A case for extension already exists based on other system needs, so a number of questions arise.

- What exactly should be included about literacy and numeracy?
- What other competences and emphases are awaiting attention?
- Will delivery approaches be reviewed and will more ‘practice’ opportunities be included?
- Where will the additional time be undertaken - in college or in schools?
- What implications might emerge for access to and the cost of courses?
- Will incremental credit attach to the extended time?
- What will the new qualification be and will credits towards a master’s qualification be a feature of a new award?
- Where might extended duration fit in relation to induction?
- Will the third level colleges be resourced to deliver more at this time?

Secondly, extending the academic nature and/or pedagogical content of B.Ed programmes for post-primary teaching would most likely require a longer timescale than currently available which is not conceded in the draft plan. Nor is it explicit how current B.Ed programmes would be reconfigured to give more attention to developing competence in teaching literacy and numeracy.

Thirdly, expertise in cross-curricular and integrated approaches to teaching literacy and numeracy across subjects is weak in mainstream post-primary schools. However, some measure of notable expertise exists within some adult education settings, in special education, in primary education and in the Junior Certificate Schools Programme (JCSP) and the Leaving Certificate Applied Programme (LCA) at post-primary. All of these could be drawn on to clarify and develop this thinking further. Ideas presented in respect of ITE may have merit but must be referred to the agency with core responsibility for teacher education, the Teaching Council, and other stakeholders for extensive exploration.
**Induction Support**

Reference to the need for and important role of a national induction support programme is welcome. The draft plan infers a substantial programme is in place for newly-qualified teachers which is not the case. TUI re-iterates its disappointment that the pilot induction programme has, at least for the moment, been significantly curtailed. The suspension of mentoring and observation dimensions at post-primary level is of special concern. Therefore, it is imperative that the optional programme (eight /ten sessions) in out-of-school time maintains a focus on the ‘reflective practitioner’ and general themes as opposed to subject specific content.

Notwithstanding critical needs in the areas of literacy, numeracy and student assessment it would be remiss and regressive if the current, very limited induction programme was to become burdened with the task of providing intensive units on these issues. Despite their importance they must not compromise the wider induction support newly-qualified teachers deserve. In this regard the reference to mandatory participation in the national induction programme is misplaced. Detailed consideration of what particular support new teachers require in the area of literacy and numeracy and how to achieve this is essential but responsibility for this should rest with the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST).

**Teacher Registration**

Evaluation of ability to teach literacy and numeracy as a necessary requirement for full registration with the Teaching Council will have different meanings and different implications for individual teachers and groups of teachers. Notwithstanding that the idea may have some foundation, TUI considers it inappropriate that such definitive requirement for full registration be articulated in a discussion document where teacher education and teacher qualifications are not the primary focus.

In the event of this idea being progressed and implemented the indicative time line is unrealistic in view of the fact that appropriate systems, processes and procedures would have to be identified, tested and agreed. Significant questions arise as to who would have
the expertise to evaluate ability to teach literacy and numeracy and how this would be done? This will especially be the case for post-primary teachers where the focus of pedagogical and teaching expertise has primarily been subject specific.

**Continuing Professional Development (CPD)**

Access to relevant CPD, in respect of developing literacy and numeracy skills and assessment approaches (every five years for primary teachers and post-primary teachers of English, Irish and Maths), is of critical importance. Access to such support on a regular basis will also be essential for other post-primary teachers if they are to have ample opportunities to build capacity in integrating literacy and numeracy into classroom practice. A commitment to providing this is therefore welcome.

However, TUI is opposed to this being put forward as an element of the CPD that teachers require to maintain professional skills. A definite statement in this regard is premature, especially in the absence of detail on when and where it will be available and how it will be resourced. In addition, requiring providers of summer courses to include units on literacy and numeracy may create unnecessary restrictions on the provision of necessary and important CPD in other areas.

It is without dispute that teachers and other practitioners will need access to guidance and resources on best practice in teaching and assessment. Handbooks, online courses, DVDs will all have a role, but must not displace access to expert personnel to support the development of skills and expertise. TUI notes the intention to deploy 20 DEIS advisors to provide additional support in the area of literacy and numeracy. However, this will mean a diminution of support in other curriculum areas which will be counterproductive in the longer term. Proper investment in CPD for teachers will be critical to success. High priority needs in one area should not undermine or compromise priority needs in another.

**Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE)**

Formal recognition of the important contribution of quality ECCE provision and therefore ECCE workers, to the development of age appropriate language, literacy and
numeracy skills is critical. However, the draft plan does not appear to take real
cognisance of the variety of contexts in which ECCE operates or the mix and diversity of
skills and qualifications that currently apply. It also omits reference to the still sketchy
 provision of high quality facilities throughout the country. It, therefore, infers more even
access to and participation in quality ECCE than is the case. It is crucial that a plan for
literacy and numeracy development points up that limited access to quality ECCE is still
an issue in many communities. It must also highlight that access to such services will
have very limited long-term impact for some children, if adequate follow-up support
measures are not in place in primary and post-primary education.

To support the development of high quality ECCE provision TUI believes that all
workers acting in a lead capacity in services funded through the state (direct or indirectly)
should have a level 7 qualification (NQF) on entry or be afforded an opportunity to
obtain this over time. This is especially important if they are to develop the particular
and high quality skills necessary to support the development of early literacy, numeracy
and language skills, design and implement programmes and provide leadership or
direction to other staff. Other workers charged with responsibility for supporting literacy,
numeracy and language development should have a level 6 qualification (NQF) on entry
or be afforded an opportunity to obtain this over time. The TUI is mindful in this regard
that the skills of those delivering courses may need to be reviewed and upskilling
opportunities provided where appropriate. Notwithstanding the importance of ECCE it
must be borne in mind that care and pre-school settings must not be forced into becoming
highly formalised environments.

School Leadership

Self- Evaluation
School self-evaluation may legitimately become an important tool in enabling a whole
school approach to examining and reflecting on practice in the development of literacy
and numeracy skills among students. But TUI cautions self-evaluation is, as yet, an
underdeveloped and poorly understood concept in Irish education. The intention to
provide guidance and tools to support school self-evaluation with a focus on improving literacy and numeracy is, therefore, worthy and of some importance. Such support will have to be intensive in the first few years.

Unless carefully worked out and supported, a deep concern of TUI is that self-evaluation becomes an end in itself. It may lead to unrealistic expectations or targets being set. Self-evaluation could lead to increased or excessive administrative workload across the teaching staff, reducing time for teaching and could feed unhealthy competition and comparisons between schools. Of especial note is that school self-evaluation is a whole-school activity. Associated processes will be the subject of national consultation and negotiation with the teacher unions and management bodies before implementation. A further edition of this plan must acknowledge this.

**School Leaders**
The role of school leaders is paramount in setting priorities in schools. It is, therefore, understood that principals should embrace and promote the development of, and improvement in, literacy and numeracy as priorities. However, leadership and responsibility with regard to literacy and numeracy and self-evaluation will not be confined to principals. It will have to extend to deputy principals, senior staff teams, and indeed, all class teachers if it is to have impact. A distributive approach to leadership is therefore advised.

The inclusion of mandatory units on the teaching and assessment of literacy and numeracy and on self-evaluation in leadership programmes for aspiring principals may have merit. TUI assumes this could only apply to courses funded through public funds which raises the question of access and availability. Careful consideration of the focus of such units and depth of treatment in the context of a leadership role will be important. Opportunities to revisit these themes on a regular basis will also be important if effective and lasting impact is expected. This idea begs a question - what provision will be made for those currently serving as principals?
The notion that successful completion of leadership development courses will be mandatory for applicants for a position of principal from a fixed date is of some concern and requires further clarification. Is it intended that only those who have completed leadership courses organised or sponsored by the Department of Education and Skills will be considered for principal or deputy principal positions? This would be unacceptable to the TUI. What would happen to those who complete post-graduate programmes in leadership and management in universities? Would appropriate modules be made available through another channel to make up any deficits? Is it intended to consult with a variety of course providers as to how all education leadership and management courses could address the issue of literacy and numeracy appropriately from policy, development and leadership perspectives? As with other ideas these matters are generally the subject of discussions with key stakeholders before definitive decisions, which could have quite critical implications for individuals and their promotion opportunities, are taken.

**Giving Priority to Language Skills, Literacy and Numeracy**

**The Learning Experience**

Section 4 of the draft plan attends to curriculum issues and ‘giving priority to language skills, literacy and numeracy’. It identifies a number of overarching directions in relation to getting the learning experience right - what teachers will be involved, content of curricula, what children and young people should learn at each stage of development and seamless development from ECCE to end of compulsory education? It is not disputed that all of these, to varying degrees, have strong contributions to make to performance and achievement by individuals, by specific groups and in general.

However, as pointed out earlier, there is insufficient acknowledgment of the tension between the teaching effort, the personal dispositions and abilities of children and young people and the variety of out-of-school factors (community, family and individual) that bear on performance. On the one hand the emphasis in this section and the clarity of many of the actions can be taken to indicate clear intent to bring about change in performance levels in literacy and numeracy. Worryingly, on the other hand, the actions
could be read as suggesting a move towards a curriculum with a more technical, restricted focus. How each action will be supported and how it is defined and understood against the wider curriculum objectives is therefore, a key issue?

**Early Learning**

In principle, TUI supports the view that a high focus on ECCE education and early primary education is essential. In respect of ECCE TUI re-iterates the need to invest in developing the sector further to ensure even access and to build capacity within the workforce in order that a readiness for learning is created and that special interventions needed by some children are identified. Nonetheless, it would be retrograde if the learning experience at this stage becomes too formalised and focused on technical skills. TUI notes the draft plan reflects a belief that class size is important in early years education. It supports this, but it also believes ‘small’ class size is important at other levels including post-primary, especially for some groups of students.

A move to review the curriculum for early years education and the general curriculum at primary level is supported. TUI will leave the detail of how this is best achieved to those most expert in this field. It cautions, however, against rash judgment and decisions in respect of the time to be allocated to core literacy and numeracy which may have an undue negative impact on other areas.

**The Post-Primary Environment**

The post-primary curriculum and how it is organised and delivered is a core area of interest for TUI. In respect of both literacy and numeracy greater connection between primary and post-primary is supported. TUI supports efforts that focus on general measures that will target all students, even though outcomes will vary. Specific measures should also be aligned with particular or special needs.

It is without doubt that girls perform better than boys in reading and, therefore, it may be appropriate to review curricula to better exploit and match the interest of boys. However, an appropriate balance must be ensured within the suite of tastes and interests addressed.
One might ask the same question in respect of how a maths curriculum is designed, given the fact that boys generally perform better than girls. Is it understood that Project Maths has addressed gender differences as a core aim and if so will outcomes be rigorously monitored? Continued implementation of Project Maths is supported and TUI agrees it will need careful monitoring to establish if, in reality, it leads to improved performance and achievement levels.

The ideas of increasing the time for teaching maths each week and requiring maths to be taught for three periods in transition year are viewed with caution. Transition year is not available to all students and more especially, many who need additional support do not, or can not, opt for this programme. Given the bonus points measure now in place for entry to third level courses such changes will advantage some over others, with particular long-term negative outcome for some students. The overall time allocated to maths, English or Irish into the future must be examined in the context of the integrated, cross curricular approach being advocated, which if adequately supported will increase exposure in any case. A high risk is that efforts to improve attention to, and time on, numeracy, maths, literacy and language could tip the balance too far in one direction. Consequently, other subjects and learning important for young people could unduly suffer.

**Responsibility of All Teachers**

The concept of all teachers taking responsibility for literacy and numeracy development among students is endorsed by TUI but with some reservation. This is not a new concept in Irish education. It has been used in adult education settings, special education settings and in the JCSP with some success. However, it will not be an easy undertaking in post-primary education, not least because of the traditional and deep rooted subject focus at this level. In addition achieving points for entry to third level courses has become the primary measure of success in the Leaving Certificate which underpins teaching and learning effort in senior cycle education.
Sensitivity, time and resources will be required to change attitudes and build an appreciation of the potential and benefit of all teachers sharing responsibility for developing literacy and numeracy competence among young people. More particularly, it will require investment in building capacity among teachers to support this approach while maintaining the appropriate and necessary focus on specific subject content.

In the early stages extensive support will be required for all teachers. This should incorporate external support through the PDST and on-site teachers who have particular expertise in this approach. It will also require the development of a critical level of teaching materials and resources (including digital resources) to maintain capacity over time. Clearly, ITE should be significant in setting the scene for new teachers to embrace the approach advocated so an increased focus on this is a must. On-the-job, on-site induction support that includes mentoring and observation time for newly-qualified teachers will also be important in this regard.

**The Junior Cycle and the Junior Certificate**

TUI has for some time supported the view that the Junior Cycle curriculum is overloaded and that the emphasis on the Junior Certificate Examinations, now viewed by most as a preparation for the Leaving Certificate, has thwarted what is taught and learned. It welcomes opportunities to address this in a strategic manner and accepts a move towards a new Junior Cycle presents an opportunity to introduce change simultaneously across the system at this level. However, as already noted, it is important that efforts to support improvement in literacy and numeracy skills do not unnecessarily or excessively compromise specific subject knowledge in other areas or displace the broad learning experience young people deserve.

A cautionary approach is advised in considering reform in terms of what it is young people should have experienced or should know at the end of the cycle, the number of subjects or areas that can be studied and what will be examined and tested. A reduction in the overall ‘curriculum load’ should be the main focus. The more integrated, cross curricular approach being advocated may resolve some issues in this regard. A revised
curriculum should continue to provide broad learning experiences for young people, exposing them to a variety of disciplines. A rash approach presents a high risk of a rather contrived learning environment and, therefore, a very limited student experience.

A revised emphasis in the Junior Cycle English Examination to address basic literacy and language skills may pose relevant opportunities to redirect teaching and learning efforts. This, however, should only be pursued in small measure, while we await decision on a new Junior Cycle programme. A move to restrict the number of subjects taken in the Junior Certificate Examinations may also be reasonable but will be limited in what it would achieve in the short-term. Such a move may, or may not, lead to a significant shift in how schools organise their current Junior Cycle programme. It may not have the intended outcome of increasing time on literacy and numeracy and may not benefit a large cohort of students.

TUI understands that the timescale for the introduction of a new Junior Cycle, if agreed, in the bigger scheme of things will be short (5/6 years). Interim measures could in fact delay and distract from attempts to bring this about. It may, therefore, be better to wait and see what emerges from the current work on Junior Cycle reform before making significant decisions with regard to the number of subjects studied at present or the format and emphasis of current examinations. There will be little appetite among schools and teachers to make major changes in some subjects now and embark on more change within a few years.

**Targeting Resources on Learners at Risk**

**Specific Learners and Groups at Risk**

This section looks at targeting resources at learners and groups at risk of failing to achieve the levels of literacy and numeracy required to progress in the education system and to function effectively in society. It focuses on those from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, those for whom English is an additional language, Travellers and those who become disaffected with school. Considerable flexibility is implied for schools in how
they use resources to meet the needs of their students and their communities. Disappointingly, the many social, personal and economic barriers these young people and their families face are not detailed, nor is the impact the barriers have on access to, participation in, and benefit from education, over which the school has little influence.

The draft plans recognises the strengths and lessons from current and past work with respect to these groups. Drawing on these the actions outlined emphasise the need to learn from best practice and the need for tracking, assessment and CPD for staff. A specific action to continue to support enhanced literacy, numeracy and language development in DEIS urban schools is flagged but a similar action is not listed for rural schools. Clarification is required on the thinking behind this. In this regard TUI notes with much concern the recent withdrawal of, or significant reduction in, supports for Traveller Education, Rural Co-ordinators who had a specific remit to support literacy and numeracy development and English as an Additional Language (EAL) - a fact not acknowledged in the draft plan.

While the need for review and some capacity for re-orientation of resources are accepted the withdrawal of a significant level of resources is viewed as a strong contradiction to a policy commitment to support these groups adequately. In reality, it will be difficult to bring about real and significant improvements for these groups given the current environment and resource allocations.

Again this section attends to the need to up-skill and train ECCE workers, this time in oral language development. Laudable, but the timescale is completely unrealistic in view of the low qualifications base and the size of the sector. With specific reference to EAL the emphasis on all teachers having responsibility is presented as a re-orientation and re-prioritisation of spending. As with the integration of literacy and numeracy across subjects, this is no easy task and requires considerable skill and insights, both in terms of supporting the learning and assessing progress. While some tools are available many teachers report a lack of access to adequate and appropriate CPD, a lack of relevant
resources and a lack of expertise in assessing students. This must be corrected and adequate resources provided if any reasonable progress is to be achieved.

**Special Educational Needs**

Conspicuously, there is a clear lack of attention to students with special educational needs. This is unacceptable, unless it is intended to prepare a separate plan for these students. Given the number of students with assessed special educational needs or general learning disabilities, coupled with the policy of integration and its implications for mainstream schools, provision for students with particular needs must be addressed. Appropriate actions must be identified as part of a national plan for literacy and numeracy development.

**Youthreach**

It is to be expected to some degree that the evaluation of Youthreach by the Inspectorate points to challenges in developing literacy and numeracy among participants. Poor literacy and numeracy may well be among the many reasons why Youthreach participants became disaffected from school in the first instance and find it difficult to engage in learning. This issue at times cannot be removed from the wider societal context and the home and community environment in which these young people live that can have a negative impact on educational achievement.

Given the educational and social vulnerability of Youthreach participants substantial investment is essential. The actions set out are useful and may have beneficial outcome for individuals. TUI believes that more intensive allocation of adequately qualified and trained teachers and support personnel should also be included. However, TUI re-iterates its position that the overall suite of actions presented in the draft plan does not represent a deep commitment to address inequities and inequalities within society and the education system.
Fostering Continuous Improvement

A Case for Testing and Improvement

The case for gathering evidence of how well students are learning and using this to improve the learning opportunities is set out in section 6. The primary emphasis is on the use of standardised tests to assess student achievement in literacy and numeracy. This will then generate evidence and data to report on progress (to students, parents or management and for national data collection), self-evaluate and plan for improvement. To this end a number of priorities are set out under five key actions areas:

- Developing national standards to support teachers in generating and using assessment data
- Supporting teachers and schools to use national standards to assess and report on achievement and progress
- Requiring all schools to implement standardised tests (at fixed points), to report outcomes and use these to inform evaluation and improvement
- Collecting national data and enabling schools to use data to compare their students against matching schools and national trends
- Using aggregated national data to support evaluation and improvement.

Evidence from existing national assessment tests for reading and maths and from international comparative tests points to, at best, a static or downward trend in reading and maths competence among young Irish people. Strong anecdotal but consistent commentary from employers and third level personnel in recent years suggests that many young people lack sufficient command of functional literacy and numeracy on leaving school. These trends clearly point to the need for a strategic approach to setting expected standards, assessing student achievement against these and identifying areas for improvement into the future.
Using Standardised Tests – Some Questions and Issues

TUI is not per se against standardised testing as one element of a multi-pronged strategy to support student improvement and progress. However, the actions and associated sub-actions set out in this section of the draft plan raise many questions. In the first instance developing national standards and assessment tools or the resultant assessment data will not necessarily or easily bring about change in general classroom practice, a key objective of the draft plan. It is reasonably well established that using assessment evidence effectively to promote student progress and change classroom practice is challenging. It requires that teachers are heavily supported in their engagement with the data, involving critical analysis and discussion on the data generated and reflection on their individual and school wide practices.

The draft plan acknowledges this and notes Irish evidence that the outcome of national assessments has had limited impact on classroom practice. Explicit actions in this regard refer to developing tasks and tests against which teachers can readily, validly and reliably interpret and communicate their students’ progress, making assessments instruments available online and providing continuing professional development opportunities. Questions and issues abound.

- Which teachers at post-primary level will carry out, administer and analyse tasks, tests and assessments – all, some, English, maths, learning support?
- How can the information flow be managed and expertise developed across the body of teachers to enable the outcome of standardised tests to exert appropriate but effective impact on classroom practice?
- When will all this take place?

TUI considers that supporting teachers in the effective use of standardised tests will be no small task at post-primary level, not least because of the number of teachers involved with each student or student group, the subject focus and ‘specific expertise’ of teachers. The lack of tradition and therefore, expertise in testing against national standards for
literacy and numeracy except in the context of determining specific learning difficulties is also a factor. Considerable more detail and clarification is required in this regard.

**The Post-Primary Context**

The complexity of the post-primary context with respect to subject focus, number of students, number of teachers, timetabling issues all beg questions as to when standardised tests should be administered, processed, analysed and reported to all the players (students, parents, teachers and others). Actions set out in the draft plan say tests are to be conducted once in post-primary schools, at the end of second year.

Initially to be administered to a sample of students and schools overtime all students will be expected to participate. Schools are already busier than usual at the end of the year with the State Examinations and end of year in-house tests. Should the idea of conducting standardised tests at post-primary proceed, the ‘when’ requires further consideration and clarification? This will be critical in terms of operational issues and maximising potential for the analyses and interpretation of and reflection on test results.

The draft plan notes that there is no examination of literacy and numeracy per se in the Junior Certificate Examination. In general the business of literacy and numeracy is confined to teachers of English and maths. Further clarification is necessary in respect of whether the proposed standardised tests will be related to the curriculum, aspects of the curriculum or whether the test contents will be more general and random in nature. Issues will arise as to the exact role and function of each teacher involved.

We may, indeed, need to assess if students are making progress in literacy and numeracy more often and at more stages in the formal education cycle than is currently the practice. Standardised tests may have a contribution to make but some jurisdictions report that the use of standardised tests has led to the same ‘exam and test driven’ phenomena that we experience in Ireland in relation to the state examinations. Let us be aware!
**Using Data for Comparative Purposes**

Strong reference is made to the intention to encourage schools to use data outcomes from standardised tests to compare their results with ‘matched schools’ or others like them. Collection of national data to assist schools in reviewing the comparative performance of their students against national trends and standards and to support school evaluation, school inspection and school improvement is also a key action area. TUI sees significant risks emerging in this regard especially in post-primary schools. Almost inevitably, unrealistic expectations may be placed on particular teachers and schools to show improvement in literacy and numeracy against the odds. Unintentionally, this could lead to a very restricted Junior Cycle programme being offered to some cohorts of students or in some schools. League tables are another big concern. Although not advocated in the draft plan an emphasis on comparing data between schools could inadvertently fuel the emergence of league tables. Once in train it would be hard to reverse such a trend.

Closely allied to this is the risk of further polarisation of schools in terms of future enrolment patterns, student profile and accentuated inequities. Collection of national data or schools judiciously using local school data in tandem with it in order to critique students’ progress is not the issue. The critical area of concern is the emergence of practices at school level, within the education system or in the wider public arena that will accentuate unhealthy and unfair comparisons and competition between schools. TUI emphasises that while initial research work has been conducted and dialogue on standardised testing has begun the real debate has yet to take place. Setting out the definite actions in this regard is, therefore, premature.

**Enabling Parents and Communities**

The backdrop for the proposed actions in relation to the involvement of parents, grandparents and others in supporting children and young people to learn literacy and numeracy is two pronged:
• the critical contribution of the home environment in terms of engagement, support, setting expectations and the development of early language skills
• the importance of community based actions and initiatives in fostering literacy and numeracy skills.

**Building Awareness through Adult Literacy Skills**

TUI welcomes a commitment to a national information campaign to build awareness about the important role of parents and communities. However, it appears that this is to be confined to adults who themselves need to develop better literacy and numeracy skills. While this constitutes a large number of people it is only a fraction of the overall number of adults who need to be targeted. Furthermore, it is not clear what specific actions will be taken in adult literacy courses to better equip adults in developing the specific skills to work with children or young people. Are the online resources targeted at building awareness, providing tools for those delivering courses in adult literacy and numeracy or for use by adults when working with children and young people?

The development of literacy and numeracy skills among adults will clearly support their capacity to engage in their child’s or other young peoples’ education. If adult literacy services are to have core responsibility in this area then consistent effort must be made within all Vocational Educational Committees (VEC). To date measures have been limited and varied in terms of the numbers benefitting and geographical spread. Many literacy schemes are already working within very tight budget constraints and a widening of the focus without a strengthening of resources may simply mean a diminution of other aspects of current services.

**General Support for All Parents /Adults**

It is suggested that direct support will be made available to all parents using Aistear but it is very unclear how this will happen. Will the emphasis be on resources, tip sheets or on actual and direct engagement with parents? The further action about ensuring parental engagement, while well intentioned, may not translate into anything wider or different than we have already. The question is will this be adequate to draw more
parents/guardians/others across the social groupings into a space where they are more actively engaged with and better able to support the educational progress of children and young people.

Community and Family Initiatives and a Need for Cohesion

The draft plan emphasises continued support for community and family literacy initiatives (currently active in some communities under the DEIS programme and the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs) that have proven effective. This is welcome but as with adult literacy services the union emphasises that these measures are limited in scope in terms of who they target and the numbers benefiting or engaging.

TUI respects that a variety of individual, family and community contexts exist. These may require different and mixed responses to effect local action and to have a deep and lasting impact on educational outcomes for children and young people.

Notwithstanding this, it is surprising that the draft plan does not draw attention to the need for greater cohesion and connectedness between the variety of community-based supports and initiatives that are in place, sometimes with patchy and limited impact. It is noted that the draft plan highlights evidence that ‘greater leadership, quality assurance and support’ are needed for community initiatives to be effective. However, the actions suggested do not address this issue directly. Of particular note is the absence of attention to the need to expand library facilities and build their capacity in many communities to ‘enable’ some of the actions and the expected by-products e.g. greater interest and engagement in reading, greater use of ICT for educational purposes. This is important in all communities but especially in those experiencing low levels of social and cultural capital.

A Consistent National Focus

The draft plan suggests a relentless focus on literacy and numeracy. TUI is concerned that this is expected without significant new investment. It accepts that some re-orientation of resources and effort is possible but this is unlikely to achieve all that is
intended or needed. Therefore, it is somewhat suspicious that the relentless focus will be on what teachers and schools do as opposed to action beyond that space.

The union welcomes the intention to set up two bodies to support implementation of the actions - The National Literacy and Numeracy Implementation Group and the National Literacy and Numeracy Forum. Given the key role of schools leaders and teachers in bringing about change it expects to be represented on and actively involved in both of these.

**Concluding Remarks**

The draft plan on literacy and numeracy is timely and welcome. Although launched before the PISA 2009 report was made public official government comments and public dialogue locates it very much as a response to the PISA findings for Ireland. These showed a significant drop in performance in reading and maths competence among Irish 15 year olds in relation to other countries and must be taken on board.

However, TUI is deeply concerned that the PISA findings appear to be the main driving force and stimulator for a commitment to definitive action to improve performance in literacy and numeracy skills. We must take the data from PISA seriously to a degree but we must also be aware of its weaknesses. A reactive or rushed response is risky and unnecessary. We must be mindful that while PISA is a longitudinal study it does not generate longitudinal data for individual students. Furthermore the mix of schools and cohort of students in each PISA phase is different. In particular, contextual factors vary significantly across participating countries. PISA results should, therefore, only represent a small element of the case for specific action and for radical change to our school system.

Notwithstanding the need for caution in how we view PISA results and use them to underscore the need for improvement in achievement levels, when coupled with national data and general commentary on student literacy and numeracy skills among school
leavers, a strong message emerges. Ireland is seriously at risk of falling ‘well behind’ many other countries with respect to overall educational performance. Substantial and strong action is, therefore, merited to improve literacy, language and numeracy outcomes for children and young people, as these create the foundation for wider learning, cognitive development and the attainment of high quality skills and qualifications. This draft plan is, therefore, a welcome step along the way. TUI looks forward to further exploration and development of the ideas presented for discussion.

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Better Literacy and Numeracy for Children and Young People
A Draft National Plan to Improve Literacy and Numeracy in Schools

Summary of main observations by TUI
March 2011

- A national plan to improve literacy and numeracy in schools is overdue and, therefore, welcomed by TUI.

- The draft plan overall suggests a limited interpretation of literacy and numeracy and fails to truly reflect the complexities of the multi-lingual context as well as the technological digital age in which we now operate.

- TUI is disappointed that targets and actions set out are directed primarily towards schools, teachers and teaching. There is little reference to the ‘agency’ and disposition of learners or the multiplicity of out-of-school factors that can have a negative impact on student progress.

- Of particular note is the absence of any overarching targets to move towards a more equitable system of education which has proven to have positive long-term effects on performance levels and diminishes wide variation in achievement.

- Some of the ideas with regard to initial teacher education (ITE) may be valid e.g. a review of entry requirements to emphasise literacy and numeracy or extending the duration of programmes. However, these ideas must be referred to the Teaching Council for detailed consideration.

- Reference to the need for and important role of a national induction support programme is welcome. Notwithstanding critical needs in the areas of literacy, numeracy and student assessment it would be remiss and regressive if the limited induction programme available was to be expected to provide intensive units on these issues.
• Evaluation of ability to teach literacy and numeracy as a necessary requirement for full registration with the Teaching Council may have merit. However, TUI considers it inappropriate that definitive requirements for full registration be articulated in a discussion document where teacher education and teacher qualifications are not the primary focus.

• Access to relevant CPD will be critical for all teachers. Proper investment in CPD will be key to success but high priority needs in one area should not undermine or compromise priority needs in another.

• Quality early childhood care and education (ECCE) provision will be crucial and substantial investment is required to develop the sector. Workers with responsibility for the development of literacy and numeracy should have level 6 or level 7 qualifications (NQF) on entry to the workplace or be afforded an opportunity to obtain this over time. The skills of those delivering courses may also need to be reviewed and upskilling opportunities provided where appropriate.

• School self-evaluation may become an important tool in examining practice in the development of literacy and numeracy skills. Intensive support will be required and associated processes should be the subject of national consultation and negotiation with the teacher unions and management bodies.

• TUI understands that principals should embrace and promote the development of, and improvement in, literacy and numeracy as priorities. However, leadership in this regard will have to extend to others including class teachers.

• Mandatory units on literacy and numeracy and self-evaluation in leadership programmes (for aspiring principals) could have quite critical implications for individuals and their promotion opportunities. This will have to the subject of discussions with key stakeholders before definitive decisions are taken.

• TUI endorses the view that all teachers could have some responsibility to support the development of literacy and numeracy skills. This will require sensitivity, time and resources to change attitudes and build an appreciation of the benefit and potential of
such an approach. It will be critical that efforts to support improvement in literacy and numeracy do not overly compromise specific subject knowledge or displace the broad learning experience young people deserve. Access to on-going and well supported continuing professional development opportunities through external support services and on-site experts will be essential. However, TUI is concerned about such CPD becoming a requirement for on-going registration. This requires detailed consideration and discussion.

- TUI accepts it may be appropriate to make small changes to some Junior Certificate Examinations (for example, English) to re-direct some teaching and learning effort. However, it advises against major changes to the Junior Certificate Examinations until consideration of the reform of the Junior Cycle is complete. It also cautions against the ideas of increasing the time for teaching maths each week or requiring maths to be taught for three periods in transition year.

- TUI believes specific measures to target learners at risk are important. Some of the actions presented will benefit individuals or specific groups. However, the union notes resources to some groups have been severely curtailed for example, Travellers and those for whom English is a second language. Of further concern is the lack of attention to special educational needs. In general terms TUI views the actions presented as falling well short of a commitment to address inequities and deep inequalities within society and the education system.

- TUI is not against standardised testing as one element of a multi-pronged strategy to support student improvement and progress. Nor is it against test results and resultant data being used to support review at student and school level. However, associated actions set out in the plan raise many questions. Who should carry out tests, a particular issue at post-primary level? When should they best take place? Will they lead to unfair comparisons and competition across schools or even the emergence of league tables? These issues and how schools and teachers would be supported in their engagement with and use of data all require detailed examination.

- Enabling parents and communities to support children and young people in developing literacy and numeracy skills is crucial. TUI believes the measures set out are too confined
in that they focus on building awareness as opposed to supporting actual involvement. The primary target group appears to be adults who themselves require support in developing their literacy and numeracy skills. This is important but represents a much too limited approach. The plan also lacks sufficient attention to coherence across community initiatives or ensuring adequate local facilities such as libraries are in place.

- The draft plan suggests a relentless focus on literacy and numeracy. TUI is concerned that this relentless focus will be on what teachers and schools do as opposed to action beyond that space.

- Establishing two bodies to support implementation (The National Literacy and Numeracy Implementation Group and the National Literacy and Numeracy Forum) is welcome. Given the central role of school leaders and teachers in bringing about change TUI expects to be represented on and actively involved in both.

- National and international evidence points to a strong message. Ireland is at risk of falling behind many other countries with respect to our overall educational performance. Substantial and strong action is merited to improve literacy, language and numeracy outcomes for children and young people, as these create the foundation for wider learning, cognitive development and the attainment of high quality skills and qualifications.

- TUI looks forward to further exploration and development of the ideas presented in draft plan.

Ends.