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**‘Digital Schools of Distinction’ Aims to sign up 750 new primary schools this year**

*Primary schools who achieve ‘Digital School of Distinction’ status to receive free printing for a year*

*Programme to expand into UK and Northern Ireland in 2015*

The Minister for Education and Skills, Jan O’Sullivan TD today launched the second year of ‘Digital Schools of Distinction’ and highlighted ambitious plans to grow the number of schools participating in the flagship award programme whichpromotes, recognises and encourages best practice use of technology in primary schools.

The programme is supported by HP Ireland and Microsoft Ireland who have confirmed that they will support the programme with €200,000 in funding for its second year.

More than one in three Irish primary schools – a total of 1,100 schools - signed up to become ‘Digital Schools of Distinction’, in the first full school year of the programme. The programme aims to sign up a further 750 schools during this academic year.

137 schools have already been awarded Digital School of Distinction status and it is expected that a further 300 schools will be awarded during this academic year. Plans are also in place to expand the programme into Northern Ireland and the UK in 2015.

Primary schools who achieve Digital Schools of Distinction status this year will receive a range of ICT supports, including free printing for a year via a HP OfficeJet Pro printer and a monthly printing allowance of 250 colour pages and 2,500 black and white pages; Microsoft software and educational apps as well as technical support and access to education ICT specialists.

In a survey of 300 Irish primary schools who have registered to take part in the programme, access to high speed broadband, IT maintenance, support and funding were identified as the major obstacles to integrating ICT in the classroom.

Speaking in Limerick at Scoil Íosagáin which today became the first new Digital School of Distinction to be awarded in this academic year, Minister for Education and Skills Jan O’Sullivan T.D. said: “*The Digital Schools of Distinction programme has been a huge success in its first year and I am delighted to see that the number of schools registering and receiving their accreditation is continuing to increase steadily. The programme supports the advancement of the ICT agenda in the classroom and is making a practical contribution to helping schools make the most of their digital capabilities. It also supports the objectives of the government’s Digital Strategy for Schools which will be finalised in the coming months.”*

Principal Patrick Hanley, Scoil Íosagáin said: *“Our focus is on the continued integration of ICT in the classroom, to enhance our curriculum and benefit the pupils. Supported by the Digital Schools of the Distinction programme, our pupils are given the opportunities to become familiar with a range of technologies and to develop the skills to use them in a meaningful way that cultivates their independence, problem solving, communications and collaboration abilities. It is a great honour for our school to become a Digital School of Distinction and we are looking forward to the benefits and opportunities it will undoubtedly bring us.”*

Martin Murphy, Managing Director of HP Ireland said: *“We are very pleased to continue our support for the Digital Schools of Distinction programme this year. With more than one third of Irish primary schools now registered, it is clear that there is a tremendous appetite amongst educators at primary level to make the most of their schools’ digital capabilities and that the programme is a providing much needed practical support and assistance in this regard. The success of the programme to date is a clear indication that Digital Schools of Distinction is driving ambitious targets to support schools to be best in class when it comes to the use of technology in teaching and learning at primary level.”*

Cathriona Hallahan, Managing Director, Microsoft Ireland added: *“As the economy shows clear signs of a return to growth it is more important than ever that we in industry do what we can to help equip young people with digital skills so that they can participate fully in the economy of the future. From basic IT literacy all the way up to coding – these are increasingly becoming basic requirements for young people to engage fully in society and later in the economy. We are delighted with the success of this programme to date and with the fact that it is helping keeping the issue of digital skills and IT access on the agenda while at a practical level helping to raise the awareness and skills amongst teachers and pupils throughout the country.”*

Gerard McHugh, Chair of the Digital Schools of Distinction Committee and Director of the Dublin West Education Centre concluded: “*We are delighted with the success of the programme in its first year and to receive the continuing support of our partners for the forthcoming academic year. We look forward to growing the number of schools participating in the year ahead.”*

Other findings from the research included:

* Primary school teachers were virtually unanimous (98%) that ICT used in teaching is necessary to help prepare students to live and work in the 21st century
* 80% strongly agreed that ICT used in teaching has a positive impact on student motivation
* 75% of teachers agreeing that Digital Schools of Distinction has created momentum in innovative and effective use of ICT tools by teachers
* 84% said that the programme has helped their school to focus more on ICT usage to support curriculum objectives

The Digital Schools of Distinction programme is supported by the Department of Education and Skills in partnership with Dublin West Education Centre, the Professional Development Service for Teachers/Technology in Education, the Computer Education Society of Ireland (CESI), the Irish National Teachers’ Organisation (INTO) and the Irish Primary Principals' Network (IPPN). Digital Schools of Distinction is delivered through a public private partnership in association with HP and Microsoft in Ireland.

For further information and to register online, visit [www.digitalschools.ie](http://www.digitalschools.ie) or follow @digital\_schools on Twitter for regular updates.

**Ends**

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**Note to Editors**

The five criteria under which schools are evaluated in order to become Digital Schools of Distinction are as follows:

1. Leadership and vision: Digital Schools of Distinction will have a whole-school ICT policy that outlines a vision and strategy and conveys a positive attitude towards the use of ICT.
2. ICT integration across the curriculum: Schools will show ICT integration across the curriculum in learning and teaching. Staff will demonstrate a clear understanding how ICT can be used in the curriculum to improve student learning.
3. School ICT culture: Schools will demonstrate an awareness that ICT has an impact on the quality of learning and teaching, pupils' attitudes and behaviour and the wider school community.
4. Continuing Professional Development: Schools will demonstrate a commitment to on-going professional development in relation to ICT, with a mechanism in place to inform teachers of courses in relation to professional development, as well as school-wide support and encouragement.
5. Resources and infrastructure: Schools will have in place appropriate ICT resources, including hardware, software and infrastructure, to support particular learning environments. Schools will also have deployed appropriate ICT resources that reflect the plan for future improvement and development of ICT as outlined in the whole-school policy.