

Submission on National Parents Council Strategic Plan 2024-2028

Submitted to the National Parents Council

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Introduction

We are the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA), a registered charity with 1,800 members. We believe literacy is a human right. We are committed to making sure people with unmet literacy, numeracy and digital literacy needs can fully take part in society, and have access to quality learning opportunities that meet their needs.

Some people have their **literacy needs met**; others do not.



We are pleased to contribute to the development of the National Parents Council Strategic Plan.

Literacy, numeracy and digital literacy

Literacy, numeracy and digital literacy skills involve listening, speaking, reading, writing, using numbers and everyday technology to communicate, to build relationships, to understand information and make informed choices.

Literacy, numeracy and digital skills enable people to reach their full potential, be active and critical participants in society and help address poverty and social exclusion. These life skills allow us to participate in, and make sense of, the world.



Literacy, numeracy and digital skills:

- are not static and they evolve.
- are not something that you get once in school and you have forever – you must practise these skills or you lose them. This is called “deskilling”.
- can vary depending on the context, for example, dealing with a financial service for a loan involves financial and legal terminology.
- are different for each person – you can be good in one area, for example reading, but weak in another, for example writing.

In this submission, the word “literacy” may refer to all these skills (for ease of reading). Literacy is not about individual intelligence. Literacy is about social, economic and cultural opportunity – and having equal access to opportunity is key.

Literacy needs in Ireland

Unmet literacy, numeracy and digital literacy needs arise because of educational and wider structural inequalities.

The most recent adult literacy survey (CSO 2013) showed that:

- One in six (18%) adults (aged 16 to 65) struggle with reading and understanding everyday text. For example, reading a bus timetable or understanding medicine instructions.
- One in four adults (25%) has difficulties using maths in everyday life. For example, working out a bill or calculating percentages.
- About 2 in 5 (42%) adults struggle with basic digital tasks. For example, looking up a website or sending an email. Most people who have digital literacy needs have underlying literacy issues.

There are also literacy needs among many adults where English is their Second or Other Language (ESOL).

Literacy and equality

Literacy is a barometer of equality and is a way to creating a society that is better for all. Equality is not about treating everyone in the same way - individuals' needs are sometimes best met in different ways. At present, those who need to access education and training the most have the least access. This is the Matthew effect where “without intervention, those who have acquired more education get more and those that have not, get little or nothing” (Kerckhoff & Glennie 1999).

NALA believes that priority should be given to those experiencing the most educational disadvantage – the **furthest behind first** principle in the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (UN 2015). Within such a framework, the needs of those with less than a QQI (Quality and Qualifications Ireland) Level 4 qualification should be met first. Vulnerable adults who cannot access supports, or are refused help when they need it, may not seek help again. For the furthest behind, there must be enhanced and targeted opportunities and supports.

Policy in Ireland

The Government has published a [10-year Adult Literacy for Life Strategy](#) (Government of Ireland 2021). It aims to: “ensure that everyone has the necessary literacy, numeracy and digital literacy to fully participate in society and realise their potential” (p4). The Adult Literacy for Life Strategy commits to a cross-Government, cross-economy and cross-society approach to support literacy needs. It means that a whole range of sectors will understand literacy barriers and work together to remove them. This can include early education providers, schools, and community and voluntary organisations such as the National Parents Council.

Family literacy is highlighted in the Adult Literacy for Life strategy as a key adult literacy domain (p21). The strategy commits to “enhancement of family literacy and family learning approaches which have proven to help break down intergenerational disadvantage” (p61).

Family and community literacy is also the first of six key areas in the National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People 2011-2020 (Government of Ireland 2011) – the objective is “enabling parents and communities to support children’s literacy and numeracy development” (p5). NALA understands that family and community literacy will also be one of five pillars in the new National Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy which is currently being developed by the Department of Education.

Family literacy

NALA (2022) defines family literacy as follows:

“[...] activity working with adults, both with and without their children, to improve and support the literacy-learning environment for everyone. Family Literacy activities are usually educational programmes that support parents and caregivers, (for example, grandparents, guardians) with developing and maintaining literacy in the home.”

(p9)

In practical terms, the Adult Literacy for Life Strategy (Government of Ireland 2021) describes functional literacy in family life as having “the confidence and ability to read a

bedtime story, help with maths, English or Irish homework, or even fill out a form required to register or enrol in school.” (p19).

Several research projects by NALA (e.g. NALA 2004, NALA 2011, NALA 2016, NALA 2020, NALA 2022) have shown the benefits of family literacy for both parents¹ and children. We find that many adults are motivated to return to education by wanting to help with their children’s education - “I would do a course for my children before I would do one for myself” (NALA 2020b, p10). They may want to help directly with schoolwork and/or to demonstrate a positive attitude to learning:

“I tell them I am going to school to learn too, and to do new things, and that’s important. And I tell them there is no age to stop learning. I tell them you have to keep learning because it’s a new world every day. And I want to make sure they are reading and thinking, and I want to be a good example to them in that.”

(NALA 2020b, p11)

NALA (2016) has found that family literacy programmes can address educational disadvantage, but that children from all backgrounds benefit. This report also found that family literacy programmes have long-term impact (p4).

The Department of Education commissioned a literature review (DCU 2023) to inform the development of its new National Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy. The following were some key findings in relation to family literacy:

- Reading at home and access to books at home are strongly linked to childrens’ educational achievement (p67)
- “Affective dimensions” such as enjoyment or positive attitude are also strongly linked to achievement, but generally receive less attention (p71)
- Reading loss over summer holidays has a negative impact on literacy performance in children from low-SES (socio-economic status) communities (p165)

The literature review also discusses the importance of training teachers and early childhood educators to engage with parents - across different cultures and with sensitivity to parents’ resources (DCU 2023, p184). NALA (2016) has found that “the extent of parental involvement is dependent on parents’ perception of school support for their work” and recommended

¹ In this submission, the word “parent” includes guardians and caregivers with a major role in children’s education

“better communication between home and school in relation to literacy skills” (p4).

Overall, this brief overview of Irish research into family literacy reinforces the importance of parents as the primary educators of their children. If parents are empowered to improve their literacy skills as adults, with support from early education providers and schools, they can pass on those skills to their children while also promoting a culture of learning in the family.

Recommendations for the National Parents Council Strategic Plan

NALA commends the mission of the National Parents Council in your 2018-2022 Strategic Plan, “to ensure that all parents are supported and empowered to become effective partners in their children’s education” (p5). We agree that “all communication and dialogue with parents must be regular, open, two-way and meaningful” (p5). We support your emphasis on partnership between parents, early education providers and schools, and communities. We make the recommendations below in this spirit of partnership, as an interested community organisation.

1. Adopt family literacy as a strategic priority

The National Parents Council is in a strong position

- to campaign on family literacy matters in your advocacy work, and
- to raise awareness of literacy services through your helpline and training programmes for parents.

As outlined above, parents are the heart of family literacy, and family literacy has significant benefits for parents and children.

2. Integrate national literacy strategy and policy into your strategic plan

Explicitly align your strategic plan with the Adult Literacy for Life (ALL) Strategy and contact the ALL National Programme Office in SOLAS to identify opportunities for collaboration. If you have not done so already, liaise with the Department of Education to influence and collaborate on the development and implementation of the new National Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy.

3. Put the furthest behind first

In your strategic planning, consider who are the parents who need your support the most. These may be parents of children in DEIS schools, parents who are members of marginalised communities, parents with literacy needs, and others. Target your outreach activities to the parents who are most in need.

4. Let parents and schools know about literacy resources

NALA runs a freephone information service for adults with literacy needs (1 800 20 20 65). This can refer parents to their local literacy service and/or other relevant educational services. We also run an online and distance learning service ([Learn with NALA](#)) for adults with literacy needs. We provide print and digital resources for family literacy learning (including a dedicated website, helpmykidlearn.ie). Training in Plain English and Literacy Awareness is available to help schools or early education providers be more literacy-friendly. See [NALA's website](#), or please don't hesitate to get in touch with us for more information.

5. Advocate for inclusive communication

It is essential that early education providers and schools communicate in plain language, and in accessible formats, with parents. We recommend that they refer to the [Customer Communications Toolkit for Services to the Public](#) (DPER and NDA 2023) in all their communications. Digital inclusion is also an important consideration as many parents will not have the necessary access or digital skills to communicate through email or apps. Early education providers and schools should acknowledge that parents may have literacy needs and work with those parents to ensure their voices are heard.

Conclusion

NALA applauds the National Parents Council for its work to empower parents in Irish education. We recommend that the National Parents Council prioritises family literacy in its Strategic Plan 2024-2028, and engages with national strategies for literacy.

The National Parents Council can help to combat intergenerational disadvantage in education by aiming advocacy and outreach work at the “furthest behind”, by raising awareness of literacy supports and by promoting clear communication with all parents.

We enclose a factsheet on family literacy for more details, and we are happy to discuss our comments and recommendations with you further.

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About NALA

The National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) is a charity and membership based organisation. We work to support adults with unmet literacy, numeracy and digital literacy needs to take part fully in society and to have access to learning opportunities that meet their needs. NALA does this by raising awareness of the importance of literacy, doing research and sharing good practice, providing online learning courses, providing a tutoring service and by lobbying for further investment to improve adult literacy, numeracy and digital literacy skills.

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