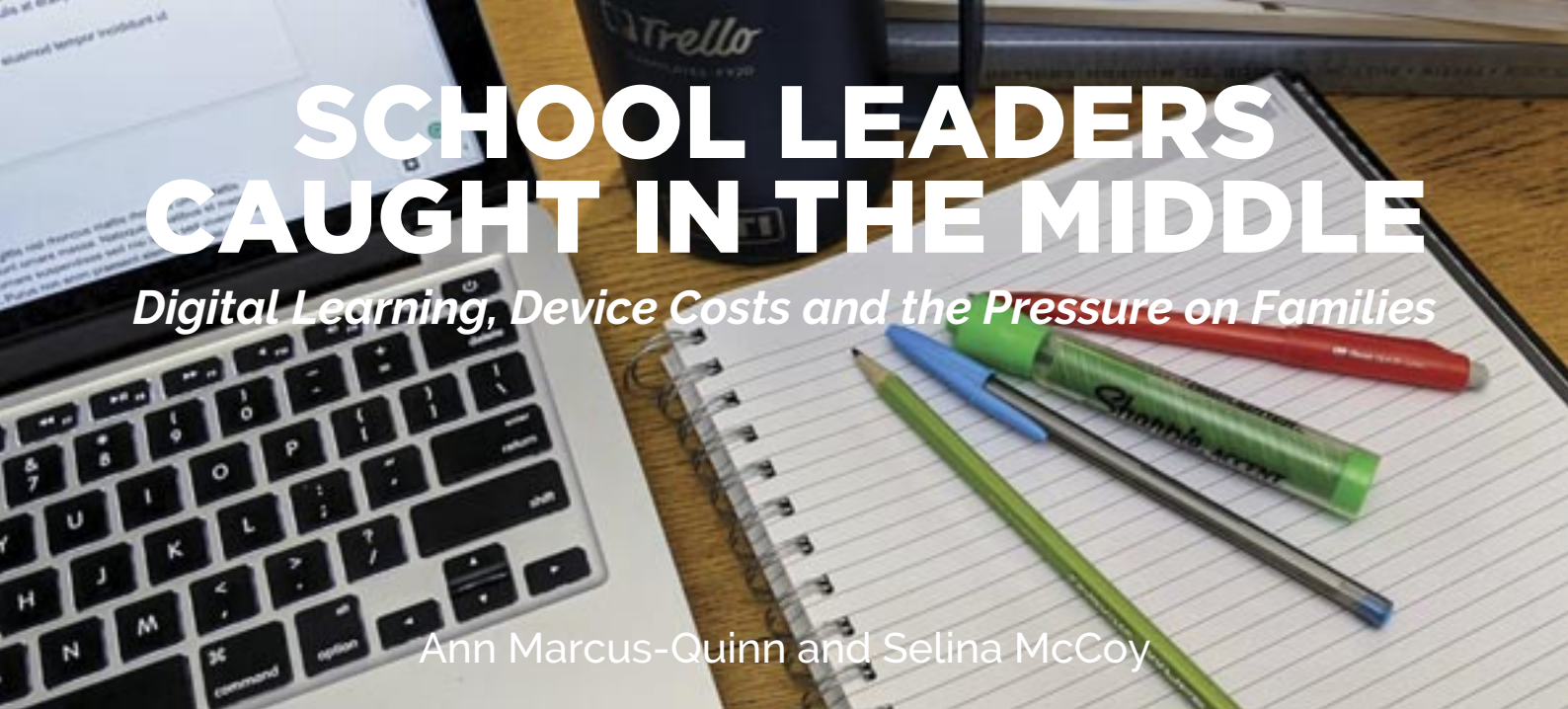




SCHOOL LEADERS CAUGHT IN THE MIDDLE

Digital Learning, Device Costs and the Pressure on Families

Ann Marcus-Quinn and Selina McCoy

Across Ireland, school leaders are facing increasingly difficult decisions about digital technology. New curriculum and assessment reforms place greater emphasis on project work, research, classroom-based assessments and ongoing student engagement with digital resources.

At the same time, parents are experiencing significant financial pressure from rising living costs and increasing educational expenses. School leaders are expected to ensure students can participate fully in modern learning while also protecting families from additional costs. The reality is that many Principals and Boards of Management are being asked to solve a national policy challenge at local level (McGarr, 2026; O'Kelly, 2026).

The debate surrounding student laptops, Chromebooks and tablets is often framed as a question of whether schools should require devices. However, our research suggests that a more important question is why schools increasingly feel they have little alternative.

While the Department of Education and Youth maintains that there is no requirement for students to own personal devices, the practical demands of curriculum reform are creating expectations that students will have regular access to technology (Department of Education, 2022). Schools are attempting to respond to these changes, often without the level of funding that would allow them to provide devices directly.

The challenge for school leaders is straightforward. If digital access is increasingly necessary for teaching, learning and assessment, someone must pay for it. Current ICT grants support important infrastructure improvements but do not provide sufficient funding for schools to purchase a device for every student. Faced with this reality, some schools have introduced one-to-one device programmes that require families to purchase approved devices. Others continue to rely on shared school equipment, while many are trying to find a balance between educational need and affordability. Whatever approach is taken, leaders are aware that there are no easy answers.

Our analysis of 722 post-primary schools found evidence of structured one-to-one device arrangements in approximately 30 per cent of schools. Behind these figures are leadership teams trying to plan for curriculum delivery, broadband

capacity, safeguarding requirements, technical support and student access simultaneously. The decision to introduce a device programme is rarely taken lightly.

School leaders know that every additional cost creates pressure for families already struggling to meet educational expenses.

The financial implications for parents are substantial. Device packages frequently cost between €600 and €800 when hardware, software, warranty cover, support services and management systems are included (Marcus-Quinn and McCoy, 2026). For families with more than one child in post-primary education, these costs quickly multiply. Research from the Irish League of Credit Unions shows that one-third of parents now expect to go into debt to cover back-to-school costs, while Barnardos highlights growing evidence that education expenses are forcing some families to cut spending on essential household needs (Barnardos, 2025).

Against this backdrop, the introduction of mandatory devices can become a source of considerable anxiety for parents.

It is important, however, that school leaders do not become the target of frustrations that originate elsewhere in the system. Most Principals are acutely aware of the pressure families face (Butler et al, 2024). Indeed, many schools have delayed introducing device schemes precisely because of affordability concerns. Others have developed loan schemes, sought additional grants, increased access to shared devices or have explored payment plans to reduce barriers for students. Yet these local solutions can only go so far when the underlying issue is a lack of consistent national provision.

The research also found that schools serving disadvantaged communities were less likely to operate mandatory device schemes. This suggests that leaders in these contexts are particularly conscious of the challenges facing families. However, this creates another dilemma. Students in schools that cannot introduce one-to-one device programmes may face reduced access to the same digital learning opportunities increasingly available elsewhere. School leaders therefore find themselves balancing two competing commitments: protecting families from financial hardship, while ensuring students are not disadvantaged educationally.

Perhaps the strongest message emerging from the study is

that the issue of digital devices is no longer merely a school-level matter. If digital technologies are becoming essential for participation in modern education, then their provision should be considered a system responsibility rather than the responsibility of individual schools or individual families.

International examples show that alternative models are possible, including state-funded provision, central procurement systems, rental schemes and targeted support for lower-income households. These approaches reduce both financial pressure on parents and the burden placed on school leaders, who currently must navigate these decisions largely on their own.

Ireland is not alone in grappling with the challenge of providing students with access to digital technology. Several European countries have adopted approaches that place less of the financial burden on families and individual schools. In Denmark, if a computer is required for teaching or homework, schools or municipalities must ensure that students have access to one, and schools cannot require parents to purchase devices (Denmark Ministry of Education, 2026). Austria has introduced a national Digital Learning Device Initiative that provides digital devices to lower secondary students through a state-supported programme (Government of Austria, 2026).

In Malta, a government and EU-funded initiative is providing laptops to secondary school students as part of a national strategy for digital learning (European Commission, 2026). Other countries have adopted subsidised approaches. In Belgium, families can receive financial support towards the purchase or lease of a device, while Luxembourg operates a low-cost rental model supported by government subsidies. These examples demonstrate that while digital learning is increasingly viewed as essential across Europe, many countries have recognised that the responsibility for funding access should not rest solely with parents or individual schools. Instead, they have developed national frameworks that share costs across the education system and provide greater consistency and equity for students, families and school leaders alike.

School leaders have consistently demonstrated their willingness to support innovation and embrace digital learning. What they need now is not further pressure but greater support. They should not be forced to choose between educational opportunity and affordability, nor should parents be required to shoulder costs that arise from national policy developments.

A coherent national approach to device provision would ensure that students can benefit from digital learning, families are protected from excessive costs, and school leaders are no longer left carrying responsibility for a problem they did not create.

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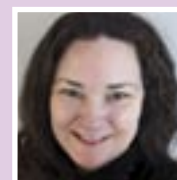
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