Why an Up-to-Date Acceptable Use Policy is Critical for the Whole School Community

Introduction

The first acceptable use policies (AUPs) on school websites appeared in the early 1990s. As schools started to go online, there was a growing need to establish guidelines for appropriate and responsible use of digital resources. AUPs were developed as part of the broader effort to educate students, teachers, and staff on the ethical use of the internet and to protect users and the institution from misuse (Perks et al., 1997).

In 2018, the Department of Education advised schools to create a comprehensive policy on tablet and smartphone use, integrating technology into teaching and learning. Schools were encouraged to consult the entire school community to ensure that the policy met the school's needs, and advised to regularly review and update the policy.

It was noted that this consultation may require revisions to existing policies, such as acceptable usage, anti-bullying, data protection, bring-your-own-device, and wellbeing policies. In October 2019, there were 32 post-primary schools in Ireland with 1,000+ students. In October 2023 there were 49. An AUP is crucial for all schools but particularly for larger schools. Yet many have not regularly reviewed or updated theirs since 2020.

An acceptable use policy is crucial because it sets clear guidelines for the responsible use of technology. It helps protect students from online dangers such as cyberbullying, inappropriate content, and privacy breaches. By outlining acceptable behaviours, it promotes a safe and productive learning environment. It educates students on digital citizenship, teaching them to use technology ethically and responsibly. It protects the school legally by ensuring compliance. It fosters a culture of respect and accountability, essential for preparing students for the digital world and their careers. It

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Schools should regularly review and update their acceptable use policies (AUPs) to reflect emerging digital trends, cyber threats, and legal requirements. This article reports on a review of AUPs from 32 large schools. It describes common issues, makes recommendations, and points to resources to help schools craft policies that foster a safe, responsible, and inclusive digital environment.

supports a school's mission of providing a safe, respectful, and effective educational environment.

Outdated AUPs

An outdated AUP poses significant challenges for teachers. Firstly, it may fail to address new technologies and trends, leaving teachers without clear guidelines for managing current digital tools and platforms. This can lead to inconsistent enforcement of rules, and confusion among students about acceptable behaviour. Secondly, it may not cover emerging online threats, putting students and the school's network at risk. Teachers may struggle to protect students from new forms of cyberbullying or inappropriate content that were not anticipated in the old policy. Legal and regulatory standards evolve, and an outdated AUP may not comply with current laws, potentially exposing teachers and the school to legal liabilities.

An outdated AUP can also undermine teachers' authority and credibility, as students may view it as obsolete, reducing their adherence to rules and respect for digital citizenship. Finally, students can be negatively impacted when an outdated AUP does not explicitly address smartphone and tablet usage in certain areas. Students can be reprimanded for using their smartphone in a common areas (e.g., corridor, locker area) despite the AUP containing no guidelines on this, leading to unnecessary student confusion and parental complaints.

An AUP helps ensure that everyone understands the rules on network use, which is critical for maintaining network integrity and performance.

Larger schools have more students, teachers, and staff, increasing the likelihood of varied behaviours and potential misuse of technology. A comprehensive AUP helps manage these risks by setting clear expectations. Larger schools typically have increased network traffic, which can increase vulnerability to security breaches or misuse. An AUP helps ensure that everyone understands the rules on network use, which is critical for maintaining network integrity and performance. In larger schools with a wider range of technology and online resources, an AUP ensures that users understand how to use these appropriately.

Larger schools face greater scrutiny of their legal and ethical responsibilities. An AUP shows the school's commitment to protecting students, staff, and the institution from legal issues related to inappropriate use of technology. In larger schools, managing technology use becomes more complex, with potentially hundreds or thousands of devices and users. An AUP provides a framework for consistent management and helps pre-empt issues. With more students and staff, the amount of sensitive data stored increases, making it a more attractive target for cyber-attacks. A robust AUP can include provisions for safeguarding personal data, mitigating these risks.

Common problems

In summer 2024, I reviewed the AUPs for 32 of the largest schools in Ireland and found many shortcomings. The main issues identified include:

1. *Lack of consistency and comprehensiveness:* One school lacked a dedicated AUP, distributing relevant content across multiple outdated documents. Some AUPs appeared as unedited templates, indicating poor review or oversight.
2. *Accessibility problems:* Four schools provided AUPs as scanned PDFs, violating accessibility standards.
3. *Policy scope and updates:* Many AUPs were outdated, lacked consistent updates, and failed to address current trends like mobile data use that bypasses school filters.
4. *Content gaps:* Not all AUPs detailed content-filtering levels, and guidelines on personal device use were inconsistent. Some did not address rooted or jailbroken devices.
5. *Sanctions and legal compliance:* Most AUPs included sanctions for violations but varied in requiring parental and student signatures, which are crucial for accountability.
6. *Naming and navigation issues:* Document-naming conventions were inconsistent, complicating access and usability. Some documents were embedded in paged viewers, making navigation cumbersome.
7. *Educational and safety measures:* Only six schools explicitly integrated internet safety education in their curricula, highlighting a gap in systematic educational efforts.
8. *Cyberbullying and social media:* While many schools had separate anti-bullying policies, coverage of cyberbullying in AUPs was inconsistent.
9. *Review and monitoring:* Most AUPs claimed annual reviews, but many were outdated, some referencing obsolete technologies (including floppy discs), indicating a lack of active policy management and stakeholder involvement.

Webwise, funded by the Department of Education and the EU, is an Irish internet safety initiative that provides resources, support, and education to help schools in developing and maintaining AUPs.

Available supports

Webwise, funded by the Department of Education and the EU, is an Irish internet safety initiative that provides resources, support, and education to help teachers, parents, and young people navigate the internet safely and responsibly. It supports schools in developing and maintaining AUPs. It provides a free AUP generator tool for customising policies, along with detailed guidelines and templates covering rights, responsibilities, and sanctions related to internet use. Webwise also offers workshops, training, and support for teachers and school leaders.

A recent report on the Irish voluntary secondary sector found that while students generally have a positive view of how their voices are acknowledged in the school environment, there is room for improvement in decision-making

(Carroll et al., 2024). This research suggests that schools could further empower students by creating more opportunities for them to actively participate in decisions that affect their educational experiences. Updating the school's AUP would be an ideal opportunity to enhance students' sense of agency and engagement, leading to a more inclusive and democratic school culture.

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The **Irish Science Teachers' Association**, Eol Oidí na hÉireann, is the professional association for teachers of science in the Republic of Ireland. As such it is represented on the relevant subject development groups of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment. Since its foundation in 1961 it has been providing continuous professional development and support for its members at both national and branch levels.

The Association has close affiliations with the Association for Science Education in the UK and is a founding member of ICASE, the International Council of Associations for Science Education. It is also represented on SCIENTIX which promotes and supports a Europe-wide collaboration among STEM (science, technology, engineering and maths) teachers, education researchers, policymakers and other STEM education professionals.

Members are also supported and informed of developments through the Association's website (www.ista.ie) and social media platforms. We also publish a Journal, SCIENCE, which is posted to members twice a year.

The major national ISTA events are the Senior Science Quiz – normally held during Science Week since 1990, the national photography competition and the Annual Conference which provides members with the opportunity to hear and meet national and international experts in areas relevant to science education. The next conference will be held in **Maynooth University** on **5th April 2025**. The theme will be: **Adapting to a Changing World in Science Education.**

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