

**ALTERNATIVE
EDUCATION
ASSESSMENT &
REGISTRATION**

Section 14 Education (Welfare) Act, 2000

**Assessment of Education
in places other than Recognised Schools**

**Independent School
Review Assessment Report**

Name of School

iScoil

Address

Acorn Centre, Warrenmount, Blackpitts, Dublin 8
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Telephone

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Name of Principal/Director

Brian Fitzsimons, CEO

Name of Assessor/s

Paul Sloan
Jane Merriman

Date of Assessment

18th December 2024

Date of Final Report

31st March 2025

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Section 1 Background Information

1.1. School Hours

Opening Time:	09:00		
Closing time:	17:00		
Main breaks during the day:	N/A		

Is school in operation for more than five years?

Yes

If no, please give date on which school commenced operation

00/00/0000

1.2. Name(s) of principal and/or other teacher(s) interviewed

(Normally interview should take place with the principal)

Mr Brian Fitzsimons, CEO

1.3. Sources of evidence on which report is based

This assessment report is based on the following sources of evidence:

- Information furnished in form R2, completed by the Principal/CEO
- An interview and presentation with the Principal/CEO
- An examination of information available on the iScoil website
- The Annual Report 2024
- A visit to the working environment of the central team

Section 2 General Information and School Context

iScoil is an inclusive online learning community for young people aged 13-16 years. This provision offers an alternative path to learning, accreditation, and progression for students outside the state school system. It allows young people to re-engage with education, achieve recognised Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) certification, and access further education, training, or employment opportunities.

iScoil receives funding from the Presentation Sisters, the Department of Education, Tusla Education Support Service, and philanthropic donations.

Referrals are made by Tusla Educational Welfare Officers, often due to:

- Significant mental health challenges, e.g., depression, anxiety, phobias, self-harm.
- Chronic illnesses such as cerebral palsy, diabetes, or chronic asthma.
- Autism.
- ADHD/ADD/ODD.
- Domestic violence or chaotic home situations.
- Trauma.
- Substance misuse.
- Behavioural issues.
- Other additional educational needs.

Each referral undergoes careful review to ensure iScoil is the best option for the young person. Students typically have been out of mainstream education for at least six months and have not completed the Junior Cycle. Clear evidence must show that all interventions and supports have been implemented to facilitate a return to mainstream education before referral. Students can engage with iScoil from their home/care setting or through blended learning centres (BLCs). BLCs are developed in partnership with services and agencies such as School Completion Programmes, regional youth services, and youth diversion projects. These partnerships enable blended learning by providing young people with face-to-face support from professional staff in the centres. Overall responsibility for the school's management lies with the CEO and the iScoil Board of Directors. In alignment with the Charities Regulatory Authority, board members fulfil their responsibilities, as reflected in the organisation's annual report.

Section 3 The Principal and Staff

The central team, based in Dublin, manages the day-to-day operations and long-term goals of iScoil. The team includes the Chief Executive Officer (CEO), Chief Operating Officer (COO), General Manager, Education Manager, Administrator, Programme Manager, Blended Learning Centre Manager, Student Support Coordinator, Education Support Coordinator, Instructional Designer, Head of Experience and Development, and a Systems Administrator. Additionally, a remote team of 18 tutors and 28 mentors supports the organisation. Both mandatory and optional CPD (Continuing Professional Development) opportunities are provided throughout the year.

iScoil recognises the vital role parents and guardians play in the education of students in their care. Building positive relationships with parents is a core component of the iScoil service. Regular communication from mentors and the wider iScoil team ensures that parents and guardians are consistently informed about progress and have access to consultation on any concerns related to student development. For example, mentors maintain regular contact with parents through phone calls, and iScoil facilitates annual parent/guardian focus groups. Surveys are also distributed to parents at set intervals to gather feedback.

Section 4 Time Devoted to Education

Students can access iScoil between 09:00 and 17:00 each day, in line with the standard school calendar. Each day, students are provided with learning goals set by their mentors and tutors. Access times may vary depending on several factors, including the individual needs of each student. iScoil is flexible and adaptable, allowing students to work at their own pace, either from home or from a local blended learning centre.

Section 5 The Learning Environment

iScoil is an online learning provider where students are members of a connected online learning community. Students log in from their homes or Blended Learning Centres. These centres, located across the country, offer students a safe and supportive working environment. All students access a secure virtual learning environment (VLE), where they collaborate with their mentor to pursue their goals and educational interests. Each young person has an Individual Education Plan (IEP), and mentors create a personalised daily learning plan tailored to their unique needs, interests, and abilities. Each day, students complete work assessed by tutors. These tutors are registered with the Teaching Council. Tutors provide feedback and adjust the following day's learning plan as needed. Term goals are set for every student, with weekly plans aligned to help them achieve these goals.

Section 6 The Educational Activities

6.1. General information

When accepted, each student receives an iScoil pack that provides all the information required to log in to our learning platform. Students begin with some basic learning activities and exercises designed to allow us to assess their learning styles and interests. Students are assigned an individual online mentor and introduced to our online course tutors. A mentor creates a personalised learning plan designed to bring out the best of the student's abilities and reflect their interests. Each day, the student completes work that is reviewed by online tutors and mentors, who provide feedback and adapt the next day's learning plan as required.

Each student has an Individual Education Plan, and daily learning goals are set to address their unique needs and abilities. iScoil offers accreditation through the QQI framework. Most students pursue QQI Level 3, which is equivalent to the Junior Cycle on the National Framework of Qualifications. Courses provide a variety of instructional content and digital resources, equipping learners with the knowledge, skills, and competence in various subject areas. Course videos are available at iscoil.ie/our-courses/.

To achieve a QQI Level 3 General Learning Award, students must complete six courses: four core courses and two optional courses. Courses can be completed at the learner's own pace, and students will receive accreditation for each course they complete.

The iScoil approach combines instructional content with individual mentoring and tutoring support to guide each student along their journey, building an assessable portfolio of work, leading to their QQI accreditation. The core courses include Communications, Computer Literacy, Personal and Interpersonal Skills, and Mathematics. The optional modules are selected from Career Preparation, Challenging Discrimination, Hairdressing, Health and Fitness, Personal Effectiveness, and Digital Media. To complete the Certificate in General Learning at QQI Level 4, students must complete Communications, Functional Maths, Information Technology Skills, Personal and Interpersonal Development, Work Experience, Personal Effectiveness, Digital Media Technology, and Animation.

6.2. Language and literacy skills

The development of language and literacy skills is a key component of the Communications course delivered as part of the QQI programmes of learning at Level 3 and/or Level 4. Each course undertaken by the students involves reading and writing. As part of the induction process, iScoil mentors assess whether there are concerns related to literacy or numeracy. When students face literacy challenges, resources are available to support the development of these skills. Students are encouraged to enhance their abilities in areas such as reading texts, writing for different audiences, and verbal communication. The Personal and Interpersonal Skills and Personal Effectiveness courses teach students how to interact successfully in various situations.

6.3. Numeracy

The purpose of the mathematics course is to equip students with the knowledge, skills, and competence needed to solve mathematical problems. Students are supported in developing these competencies in a variety of ways. The course content is designed to ensure that all mathematical knowledge and skills are applicable to solving real-life problems. As part of the induction process, iScoil mentors assess whether there are significant concerns regarding numeracy. When students face numeracy challenges, bespoke resources are provided to support the development of these skills. Additional resources are made available to supplement coursework and offer further numeracy support.

6.4. Irish

Irish is not delivered as part of the QQI programmes.

Children attending an Independent School should be afforded opportunity for the study of Irish, however the study of Irish is not a requirement for registration under Section 14 of the Education (Welfare) Act, 2000. Where Irish is included in the provision, an Independent School may identify students attending that they consider would qualify for an exemption from the study of Irish. Independent Schools can make decisions in consultation with parents regarding arrangements for these children. Any arrangements made in relation to the study of Irish does not entitle students to an exemption from the study of Irish in the event of a subsequent enrolment at a Department of Education recognised school.

Parents of children attending an Independent School should be informed of and acquaint themselves with implications of not taking Irish and/or having a second language. Parents seeking information should consult with the Department of Education www.education.ie and/or the State Examinations Commission www.examinations.ie with regard to the requirement for Irish and/or an additional language.

6.5. Other areas of learning

In addition to the core areas in literacy and numeracy, two other core subjects, Computer Literacy and Personal and Interpersonal Skills, are studied by all students.

In addition to the core courses, students select two optional courses from a range of six options: *Career Preparation, Challenging Discrimination, Digital Media, Hairdressing, Health & Fitness, and Personal Effectiveness*. Students can take Personal Effectiveness in its standard form or choose from one of four themes: Art, Animal Care, Health & Nutrition, and Sport, allowing them to focus on areas of personal interest. Students study four core courses and two elective courses to complete the QQI Level 3 Certificate in General Learning. Students are encouraged to explore their strengths, talents, interests, goals, and values, and are provided with opportunities to communicate and collaborate with others on course forums.

iScoil offers a range of extra-curricular opportunities, including access to coding courses, internet safety training, Gaisce, a book club, and discussion forums.

6.6. Special educational needs

Students can work at their own pace on a curriculum that:

- is student-centred and aligned with their interests.
- incorporates a range of teaching and assessment approaches encompassing Universal Design for Learning;
- meets individual needs and interests;
- is differentiated and highly supported.

This is facilitated by mentors who, in collaboration with tutors, develop individual education plans (IEPs) for each student to address their unique educational needs.

Section 7 Assessment and Record Keeping

All courses are designed and assessed according to QQI standards. As students work through their learning plan, they complete projects and tasks related to specified learning outcomes. These tasks are assessed by tutors on an ongoing basis to determine whether students have demonstrated that they have met the required standards of knowledge, skill, or competence. The tasks are compiled into a portfolio of evidence, which forms the basis of their continuous assessment. External authenticators and QQI personnel review the completed portfolio before validating that the required standard has been achieved.

To support this process, each student has access to an individual learning plan, which contains messages from mentors and tutors. Mentors host regular live video calls with students to guide them through coursework, while tutors provide daily feedback and individual support to each student. The learning plan also includes a progression chart for each course.

iScoil uses a CRM system to store data responsibly. This includes referral information, contact details for students, call logs, weekly progress reports, safeguarding concerns, and more.

Section 8 Other Relevant Information

The iScoil website provides more information, including video introductions to each course.

The school provided independent research commissioned by the Department of Education on the efficacy the iScoil model was made available to the assessors: 'The Efficacy of iScoil's Home-Based Provision' (Eivers, 2021)

The iScoil Strategic Plan 2030 was also made available to the assessors along with the 2024 Annual Report. A policy register (listing all organisational policies) was also accessible to the assessors.

Section 9 Evaluation of the Education Provision and Recommendations

In my opinion the education provided to the pupils of iScoil can be characterised as “a certain minimum education, moral, intellectual and social”.

The aspects of the provision that are successful include:

- The innovative approach in which the educational programme is delivered to the students.
- The accredited programmes offered to students who are no longer part of the formal education system.
- The structured and objective process by which referrals are assessed for enrolment in the school.
- The commitment of the CEO, the central team, tutors, and mentors to ensuring the success of the personalised learning programmes undertaken by the students.
- The vision and values that guide the work of the school.
- The emphasis placed by the board members on the appropriate governance of the school.

The findings of the assessment were discussed with the participants on the date of the assessment. The participants were advised that the decision regarding registration would be made by Tusla – the Child and Family Agency: Alternative Education Assessment and Registration Service (AEARS).

Following the assessment, a draft report is provided to the principal, along with a Factual Accuracy and Feedback Form, which may be submitted within a specified timeframe, in response to the content of the draft report. The report, along with any information provided on the feedback form for consideration, is brought to the AEARS Registration Panel. The Registration Panel make decisions regarding registration of children in receipt of the education at the Independent School.

Section 10 Discussion of Finding of Report with Principal

The report was discussed with the CEO, Mr. Brian Fitzsimons, at the conclusion of the visit. It was stated that the recommendation would be to retain the students of iScoil, on the register of children receiving an education in places other than recognised schools. The final decision regarding registration will be made by Tusla – the Child and Family Agency: Alternative Education Assessment and Registration Service.

Section 11 Outcome

Outcome of Tusla Alternative Education Assessment and Registration Service Panel Regarding Requirements for Section 14 Registration of Children Attending the School

Following the Assessment, the Registration Panel decided that children attending iScoil will be registered and retained on the register of children receiving an education in a place other than a recognised school as required by Section 14 of the Education (Welfare) Act, 2000.

Registration is subject to a periodic review by the Child and Family Agency