An Apple for teacher...
(and everyone in the class)

Thomas Geoghegan **spends a day at the 'iPad School', an exciting new e-learning experiment in the heart of Crumlin**

"Take your *Timelines* books out, please," says James Meehan, the history teacher. It's the first week back after midterm break at St. Kevin's College, Crumlin, and there's a feeling of the back-to-school whirlwind about its airy corridors.

Today the class is reading about the Iron Age, but instead of the sound of heavy tomes hitting the desktops, half the class eases iPads from their bags and, tapping the screen with a few effortless gestures, load up their history textbooks. "Jordan, will you start reading please?" asks Mr. Meehan, and with a little youthful rebellion, he starts, "The Iron Age began around 1400 BC …".

Welcome to the 'iPad school'.

For years, St. Kevin's has been one of the largest providers of VEC training courses and the school used income from this to invest in its facilities. St. Kevin's was an early adapter to the use of interactive white-boards and other advanced teaching technology and the school carved out a niche for itself. When the Department of Education and Training made available an IT grant to spend as schools chose, the decision was made to try a daring experiment. Principal Blake Hodkinson invested in a WiFi network, a school server and purchased iPads for all 23 first-year pupils and their teachers.

After class, Mr. Meehan explains

how it works.

"The pupils' families pay €150 per year for their child's iPad and, with that, all the textbooks they need. Often, it can cost €400 annually for the hard copies so it saves a lot of money. It also means the kids aren't carrying around heavy schoolbags, they can't say they left their books at home and it can really speed up learning in the classroom too."

It seems like a good deal. Parents pay the annual charge for the iPads and after five years, they've bought them, it reduces the cost of schoolbooks dramatically and the goal is that they improve educational outcomes.

Less waste, more fun

To find out more, I make my way to the Staff Room, a modern high-ceilinged space where teachers are relaxing and preparing for their next class. It's clear the teachers are fans of the iPads as much as kids.

"Yes, there have been teething problems," says geography teacher Denise McLaughlin. "At the beginning, the internet connection wasn't always reliable, but overall the iPads are great. Downloading the books means there's less waste – my mum's attic was full of books because she could never come to throw them away – it's more environmentally friendly and the stigma of having to use second-hand books is gone." It's also more affordable and breaks new ground for the future of education in Ireland.

I ask if the iPad is going to replace the traditional aspects of learning like spelling and handwriting. "Nothing's changed," says Irish teacher Saidhbh nic Conmara, "It's very important that students come out with good penmanship and good spelling learned the old-fashioned way – sure spell-checker for Irish is hopeless, anyway!"

"I definitely think it's the way things are going," she continues. "We all have to adapt. A friend of mine who teaches in Galway uses digital textbooks and for renewing them it's great. A new book costs only €8 this way compared to the printed ones."

Towards an e-learning strategy?

As a school supported by the Government's 'Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools' (DEIS) scheme, St. Kevin's is the first of these schools to introduce touchscreen tablets in the classroom. When I finally catch up with the busy and amiable principal, he's proud to tell me this and more.

"I like to think we're making learning sexy. Learning should be fun and the novelty of the iPad is keeping the students interested. They play on their X-Boxes at the weekend and then you ask them to look at boring books at school. Instead, learning can involve games and video. Educational content is coming along in leaps and bounds now, so change is coming."

"I think schools should be pushing this," he continues, "especially since we're told our economic recovery will rely on us being a knowledge economy. An experiment with school laptops in Utah showed how unemployment went down because, apart from improved learning tools, when students brought their laptops home, parents were learning computer skills and searching for jobs online."

What Mr. Hodkinson would like to see is a more coherent strategy for e-learning.

"It would be great if the Government funded new initiatives to build knowledge around this area that could contribute to an e-learning strategy for schools. For the time being, schools are trying things alone and trying great things."

Deadly!

Back in the classroom, I'm asking Mr. Meehan's English pupils what they think of their 'sexy' technology. They all love that they don't have to lug their books around all day. But more than that, they have loads of fun with them. Granted, some are spied checking their Facebook page, but most love playing educational games. Gareth O'Dwyer has 40 games on his iPad – one of them is '*Restaurant Story*', a game in which you run your own restaurant to teach you about home economics. Other games he has include solving maths puzzles and language games for Irish and French. Summing everything up, Jordan yells from the back, "They're deadly!"

It might take a while to know what impact the initiative is having but the school seems strongly behind the idea that technology can impact positively on the quality of education and, ultimately, on educational attainment. Already, enrolment rates are up as parents see the advantages. So far, the signs look good. ●