

# Tackling Childhood Obesity

## Opening Statement to Joint Oireachtas Committee on Children and Youth Affairs



The Teaching Council is the statutory professional standards body for teaching in Ireland. We are responsible for promoting and regulating the profession of teaching under the Teaching Council Acts 2001-2015.

Research shows that obesity is a significant issue of concern for us in Ireland. We need to see it as one aspect of the overall health and wellbeing of children and young people and of us all. Education has a vital role to play in this process – but it cannot do so in isolation from other areas of public health. It has taken time for the issue to reach these levels of concern, and it will take time, along with co-ordinated and concerted effort, to reverse this trend in a long-lasting and sustainable way.

### **Holistic approach**

What do we know about the link between mental health and weight? Prof. Jim Lucey describes it as a situation where poor mental health is both a consequence of, and contributor to, the problem of excessive weight. In other words, they are closely interlinked. It would seem prudent therefore not to seek to address one in isolation from the other.

## **What is the responsibility of teachers in this area from a Teaching Council point of view?**

In section 4 of the Code of the Professional Conduct for teachers, prepared and published by the Teaching Council, 4.4 states:

*Teachers should: apply their knowledge and experience in facilitating pupils'/students' holistic development.*

*Facilitation* implies that teachers have an important role and responsibility in supporting learners in their holistic development – but that cannot supplant the responsibility which others have in the lives of those young people – families, parents, the wider community, medical and health professionals, themselves.

The Council's Criteria and Guidelines for Programmes of Initial Teacher Education (ITE) state:

*In all areas of study [in teacher qualification programmes] there should be provision for:*

- *Students' personal and social development, having regard to teachers' pastoral role.*

## **Wellbeing for Teachers and Learners Group**

The establishment of the Wellbeing for Teachers and Learners Group (WTL) is an important development in terms of the need to address the overall wellbeing needs of all members of the school community at the same time. Obesity is a challenge for the adult population as much as it is for children and young people.

The Wellbeing for Teachers and Learners Group was established by the following organisations:

- IPPN (Irish Primary Principals' Network)
- NAPD (National Association for Principals and Deputy Principals) [Post-Primary]
- Children's Ombudsman
- National Parents' Council Primary
- Teaching Council

## **Key message**

*We need to tackle the problem of childhood obesity. We need to do so as part of a holistic approach to the overall health and wellbeing of children, young people and adults. And education has a vital role to play in that endeavour.*

*Teachers, as the leaders of learning in education, have a key role to play in ensuring that education plays its part in supporting individual and community wellbeing. But that role cannot be fulfilled sustainably in isolation from all the other professionals who work in this area.*

*Each one of us has a responsibility in this area; each one of us can do a lot. But we can do so much more when we work effectively together.*

*And we know that this is true from the experience of the Wellbeing for Teachers and Learners Group, which has demonstrated what can be achieved when all members of the school community work together to support each other's wellbeing.*

**The key point therefore in tackling childhood obesity is to understand in the first instance that it is one aspect of the overall wellbeing of our school-going population. It is a “whole of person” issue. Such an issue calls for a whole of system response. We need to join the dots.**

**Teaching Council**

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