



St. Angela's College, Sligo
Coláiste San Aingeal, Sligeach
A College of NUI Galway

Lough Gill, Co Sligo, Ireland

T: +353 (0)71 91 43580

F: +353 (0) 71 91 44585

E: admin@stangelas.nuigalway.ie

www.stangelas.nuigalway.ie

To: Committee on Children and Youth Affairs on Tackling Childhood Obesity
7th May 2018

Submission by: Amanda McCloat, Head of Home Economics Department on behalf of the Home Economics Department, St Angela's College, Sligo

The Home Economics Department at St. Angela's College, Sligo welcomes the consultation being undertaken by the Committee on Children and Youth Affairs on Tackling Childhood Obesity, and is grateful for the opportunity to participate and contribute in a meaningful way to the consultation process. St Angela's College, is a College of the National University of Ireland Galway (NUIG) and delivers the only Initial Teacher Education Programme in Home Economics to Masters level educating third level students who aspire to be a Home Economics teacher.

As Home Economists, we recognise that a multi-faceted approach to tackling the problem of obesity is needed, involving inter-sectoral collaboration among all agencies having a role to play in the management and prevention of this problem. **However, this submission will deal primarily with the aspect of education as a strategy - in particular food education, focusing on the role of the post primary school subject Home Economics in addressing the issue.**

A Healthy Weight for Ireland 2016-2025 outlines priority actions that will be taken to reduce the levels of overweight and obesity in Ireland in order to assist people to achieve better health. A key priority action, and in the context of exploring the role of Home Economics education, relates to developing and implementing a 'whole of school' approach to healthy lifestyle programmes making particular reference to curriculum, nutrition, physical activity, smoking, alcohol and mental wellbeing (Department of Health, 2016). **We will present the argument for prioritising the study of Home Economics in post primary schools for all pupils as one of the most effective health promotion strategies available to combat poor dietary choices and unhealthy eating practices and assist in achieving the aims of *A Healthy Weight for Ireland 2016-2025*.**

- 1. Schools have been identified as optimal settings for primary prevention efforts aimed at promoting and supporting the development of healthful dietary behaviours and attitudes in children and adults** (Gillman and Ludwig, 2013; Lichtenstein and Ludwig, 2010). They provide an environment where the principles of healthy eating can be taught, modelled and encouraged (Hoppu, 2010). Effective programmes are those which are taught in a sequential, integrated manner, are



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practical food skills based and focus on changing specific behaviours rather than learning general facts about nutrition. McGowan et al (2015) noted that the integration of practical culinary skills, knowledge, attitudes and confidence are all essential elements of a food education programme. Furthermore, Condrasky and Hegler (2010) identified programmes which focus on developing *sustainable healthy eating behaviour through culinary confidence and nutrition alertness are a successful approach to begin the restoration of our nation's health* (p.1). The greater the level of intensity of the programme, the greater the effect. Dietary behaviours and practices developed at a young age transition into adulthood (Mikkila et al., 2005) and have the potential to influence food preferences and eating patterns in later life. Consequently, by providing children and adolescents with the opportunity to develop the necessary knowledge and skills that promote healthy dietary behaviours, it may reduce the potential development of adverse health conditions during later life.

2. **Home Economics in schools is a comprehensive education programme which incorporates nutritional knowledge and practical culinary and food skills, underpinned by scientific theory, in a sequential and integrated manner within a 'whole of school' approach (McCloat and Caraher, 2016).** It makes a unique contribution to the education of young people focusing on the nature and challenges of their daily lives in relation to other people, to social systems and to material resources. Home Economics, as a curriculum area, *facilitates students to discover and further develop their own resources and capabilities to be used in their personal life* (IFHE, 2008, p.2). It is unique in being the only school subject which concerns itself with teaching young people practical food, cooking and health literacy skills. The uniqueness of Home Economics in Ireland must be recognised for its value and contribution in providing a holistic and trans-disciplinary approach to education for life and learning, instilling in learners' key skills along with the virtues of discernment, resourcefulness, social advocacy and a passion for betterment (Stark, 2007).
3. **Home Economics is the only school subject which teaches young people how to cook.** Research indicates that learning to cook as a young person is positively related to cooking confidence, and health and diet quality in later life (Lavelle et al, 2016a). Unfortunately, there are suggestions that point towards a decline in cooking skills among population groups (Stitt, 2006; Condrasky and Hegler, 2010; Caraher and Seeley, 2010). A lack of cooking skills often coupled with deficit in nutritional knowledge can influence families to eat outside the home (Hersch et al, 2014).



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Consequently, Lavelle et al. (2016b) recommend that food interventions should focus on developing practical culinary skills to increase cooking self-efficacy. Outside of Home Economics, there is very little chance for students to take their theoretical food knowledge and apply it to the practical experience of cooking. Condrasky and Hegler (2010) allege that making nutrition principles available to students without giving them opportunity to apply these principles is a useless exercise. They contend that programmes that focus on producing sustainable healthy eating behaviours through culinary confidence and nutrition alertness can begin to restore our nation's health.

4. **Developing food, health and culinary skills is a key focus of the new Junior Cycle Home Economics Specification (2017) due to be implemented in schools in September 2018.** The Specification comprises three strands; one of which is Food, Health and Culinary Skills which is underpinned by Health and Wellbeing element. It is envisaged, given the scope of the learning outcomes, that this Strand will have the largest time allocation and weighting. This Strand focuses on enabling students to develop *"a healthy, sustainable attitude and positive relationship with food through practical experiential learning. They apply their understanding of nutrition, diet and health principles in order to adopt a healthy lifestyle and make informed decisions that impact the health and wellbeing of themselves as individuals as well as within their families"* (DES, 2017, p.15). A universally applicable subject, HE's potential to effect change and ensure the provision of key knowledge, skills and values highlights its role as a subject for the betterment of all. This contribution is becoming increasingly recognized with 93% of survey respondents (SafeFood, 2014) advocating that education to promote healthy eating should be provided in all schools. **Given the argument for comprehensive and sequential nutrition education for all young people, does this information not imply that the mechanism already exists for the delivery of this information within the second level system through the medium of Home Economics? There is no point in creating a new curriculum subject to address the issue when one already exists.**



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5. **Due to the practical and active nature of Home Economics at Junior Cycle, students are required to engage in a critical way with food and health issues.** The Home Economics Specification at Junior Cycle emphasises that the application of practical food and health literacy skills is integral to this strand and includes menu planning; shopping; cooking; health and safety food skills; portion control; reading food labels; dietary analysis; costing; sensory analysis; food waste etc.” (DES, 2017, p.15). It is the application of theoretical knowledge and principles to practical situations in Home Economics which ensures the subject is in the best position to deliver clear, comprehensive food education. This is supported by Lichtenstein and Ludwig (2010) who state, in the Journal American Medical Association (JAMA), that a comprehensive curriculum such as Home Economics is required in schools for all students to teach young people the scientific and practical aspects of food and the basic skills of how to prepare food for themselves and their families.
6. **It is evident from international practice that Home Economics is key in many countries to the development of healthy populations.** Is it a coincidence that in countries such as Iceland and Finland where nutrition and food skills are taught as core or compulsory modules in the curriculum of all schools, the health of these nations is far superior to standards in most other countries in the developed world? In Iceland, food skills and Home Economics are high status subjects in the national curriculum from age six. Traditional cookery lessons and sound nutrition form the basis of Home Economics classes – with the emphasis on the preparation, serving and eating of family meals. In Finland, at the upper stage of education (age 14-16), Home Economics is a mandatory core subject at grade 7 where students have three hours per week involving practical and theoretical teaching with a focus on teaching lifeskills to all students in the area of “sustainable living, food knowledge and skills as well as consumer skills” (Finish National Board of Education, 2016, pg.470). In Australia, a study by Worsley et al (2015) demonstrated that Home Economics education was associated with higher levels of food knowledge across several age groups. Furthermore, in the United States there have been calls for the re-introduction of compulsory home economics in school for all students in order to address issue of chronic diseases and develop healthy cooking skills (Lichtenstein & Ludwig, 2010; Vileisis, 2008). Additionally, a Canadian study indicated that Home Economics Food and Nutrition Education is vitally important for the youth given that one third of Canadian children are overweight or obese and consequently called for policy



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measure to ensure that all children have access to Food and Nutrition Education (Slater, 2013).

Recommendations

1. In order to teach young people practical food literacy skills and empower them to make the best dietary choices for their health, **we recommend that the comprehensive curriculum of Home Economics is compulsory for all students, at a minimum, to Junior Cycle level.** Given the current relatively large provision of the subject in second level schools, extension of the subject to all schools, together with adequate physical and human resources would be a much more effective strategy than introducing piecemeal intervention programmes into an already crowded curriculum.
2. The introduction of a Home Economics module in primary schools be introduced. Provision for the training of all Primary School Teachers in a module on Home Economics to be put in place. This training should form part of their initial teacher training for new trainees. In - career development in the form of a Department of Education and Science validated course for existing teachers could be provided by the Home Economics Department of St. Angela's College.
3. Outside of the school setting, the community food education modules could be developed by Home Economists who would utilise the local school to teach families basic food and cooking skills in order to prepare healthy family meals.

Summary Statement

Home Economics makes a unique contribution to the education of young people. With a mission embedded in values of social responsibility and the empowerment of individuals and communities for human betterment, the potential of the subject as a tool for effective change must not be overlooked or underestimated. While the solution to the obesity phenomenon is multifaceted, education emerges as a clear area of access. Home Economics is a comprehensive curriculum which teaches young people scientific and practical aspects of food and the basic skills of how to prepare food for themselves and their families. Consequently, it is hoped that students will develop a confidence in choosing, preparing and cooking food.



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Through this submission we have presented an argument for prioritising the study of Home Economics in schools for all students as one of the most effective health promotion strategies available to combat poor dietary choices and practices and assist in achieving the aims of A *Healthy Weight for Ireland 2016-2025*.

The Home Economics Department would welcome the opportunity to discuss further the issues raised in this paper with the Oireachtas Committee, and to assist in whatever way possible with the work of the Committee, and the formulation of programmes in collaboration with other agencies, such as in the delivery of programmes of training as required.

Signed:

Amanda McCloat, Head of Home Economics Department, St Angela's College, Sligo

amccloat@stangelas.nuigalway.ie

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