

Tackling Childhood Obesity

Submission 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. Our functions include:

- advising the Minister of Education and Skills on entry criteria for programmes of Initial Teacher Education (ITE)
- reviewing and accrediting, as appropriate, all programmes of ITE in the State
- induction and probation of Newly Qualified Teachers (NQTs)
- maintaining the largest register of professionals in the State – there are almost 100,000 teachers on the Register
- vetting of teachers
- teachers' learning (CPD)
- Fitness to Teach

- Commissioning research to inform our work and supporting a research-informed teaching profession
- Developing and publishing a Code of Professional Conduct for the teaching profession.

According to Prof. Donal O'Shea, obesity among the adult population in Ireland has doubled over the past 40 years. At age 5, 3% of children in socioeconomic group 1 are obese, as opposed to 12% of children in Group 5. In short, 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.

Ireland is not alone in terms of the seriousness of the issue, nor in our struggle to address it in a systematic and co-ordinated way. When you consider the research in the health field however, along with some key developments in education, it appears to us that the potential for truly joining the dots is within our grasp. We cannot afford to let this opportunity pass us by.

Holistic approach

In their report for the RCSI, “The Mental Health of Young People in Ireland”, published in October 2013, Dr. Mary Cannon and Dr. Helen Coughlan stated that by the age of 13 years, 1 in 3 young people is likely to have experienced some type of mental disorder. By age 24, this figure will have increased to 1 in 2. They go on to point out:

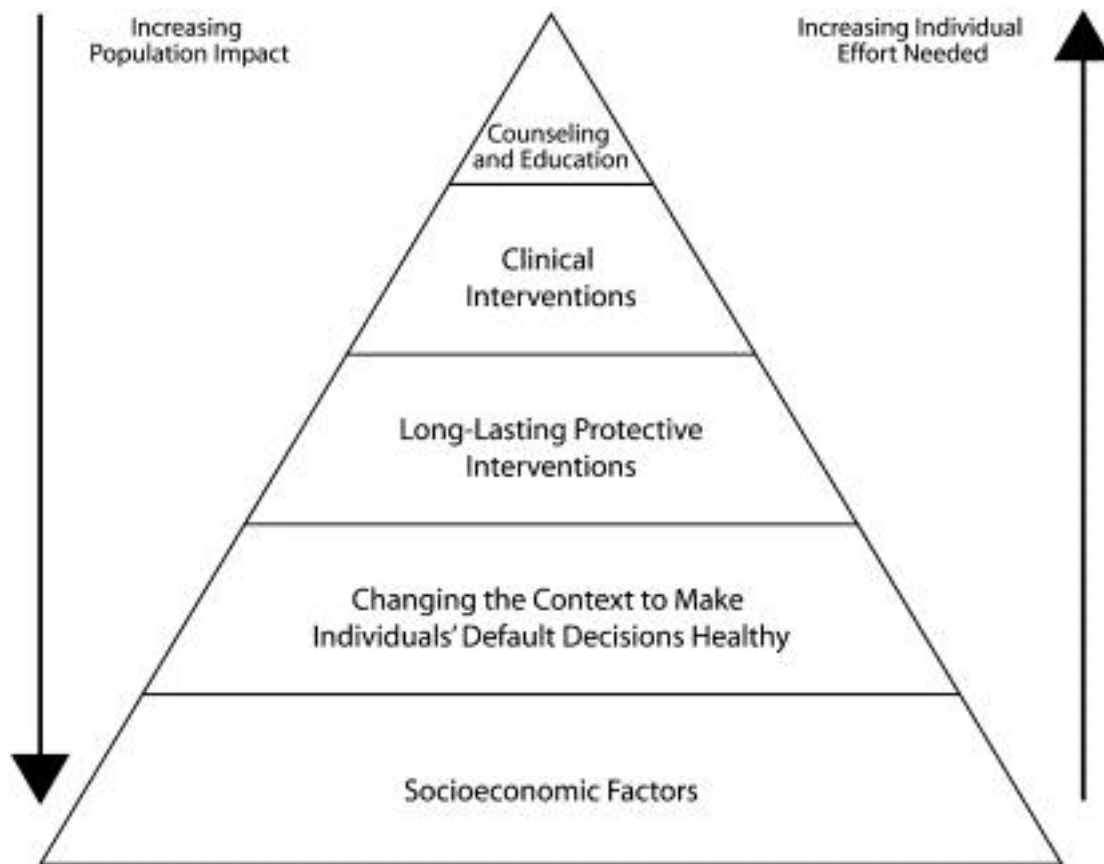
Progressive early prevention and intervention initiatives in the field of youth mental health have the potential to reduce the economic burden associated with mental ill-health among Irish people. More importantly they also have the potential to minimise the personal, relational, social and vocational impact of mental ill-health on young people, their families and wider society.

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.

We need to tackle the problem of childhood obesity. And we need to do so as part of a holistic approach to the health and wellbeing of children, young people and adults.

What role can education play?

Thomas Frieden's health pyramid (see below) sets out a framework which can serve as a useful guide to us in considering ways we wish to address particularly complex and important issues in public health, including obesity. According to Frieden, if we wish to have maximum systemic impact, we need to concentrate our resources and efforts more on the factors in the foundational layer of the pyramid i.e. socioeconomic factors. Frieden places improved education, in the context of the school system, in this foundational layer. (The term "Counselling and Education" in the pyramid has another meaning for Frieden.) The potential of education therefore to contribute to a co-ordinated and holistic approach appears to be quite strong.



Frieden's Health Impact Pyramid

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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.

There are two key words in this section – *facilitation* and *holistic*.

This submission has referred to the importance of a holistic approach earlier.

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. Teachers have an understandable fear of being seen as all things to all people, particularly in the area of physical and mental health. A sustainable approach with impact in the area of overall wellbeing, mental as well as physical, will need to help teachers and other professionals connect and collaborate more effectively with each other in the interests of our children and young people.

Such collaboration should also support their own wellbeing as professionals, so that they can sustain their professional practice in the interests of those that they serve.

For our part, the Council has identified collaboration between teachers and other professionals as an area of particular focus in the John Coolahan Research Support Framework.

The Council's national framework for teachers' learning (CPD), *Cosán*, places students' learning at the heart of the framework and at the heart of teachers' learning. Wellbeing is listed as one of the six key Learning Areas which teachers' learning should address. It is noteworthy that the definition of wellbeing in the framework states that well-being

can incorporate cultural, academic, social, emotional, physical or technological dimensions...

The 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.*

In the Learning Outcomes of the same document, under "Ethical Standards and Professional Behaviour", the Council requires that graduates of programmes of ITE "will demonstrate knowledge and understanding of the unique role of the teacher as professional in providing for the holistic development of students..."

The Learning Outcomes make clear that this role, while unique, cannot be exercised in a meaningful or sustainable way in isolation – teachers cannot be all things to all people. Under “Communication and Relationship Building”, we state that graduate teachers will demonstrate knowledge and understanding of:

- *The importance of teacher-pupil relationships in the teaching / learning process*
- *Strategies for developing positive relationships and communicating effectively with pupils, parents, colleagues, the school principal, school management, co-professionals and the wider community*
- *The roles of stakeholders and the importance of engagement and cooperation with them...*

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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.

Wellbeing for Teachers and Learners Group

In this context, 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

The aims of the group are as follows:

1. To agree a definition of wellbeing for teaching and learning for Irish education so that the wellbeing of teachers and learners is supported.
2. To promote a shared understanding of this definition amongst stakeholders in Irish education
3. To enhance co-operation between member organisations, and between the Group and stakeholders, to support an enhanced and sustainable approach to wellbeing for all learners in our education system, teachers and students alike.

The Group held its inaugural conference in Croke Park in November 2017 where a number of schools from a diversity of socio-economic backgrounds showcased their good practice in nurturing the overall wellbeing of all members of the school community – students; teachers; parents.

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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.

Next steps

In the school context, we have curriculum, syllabus or subject specifications. These are largely the “what” or the “tools” of teaching. We have curricular provision in the area of SPHE and RSE. And we have a new wellbeing programme for Junior Cycle. These are positive developments.

Teachers will tell us, however, that the quality and impact of any resource or material is only as good as the quality of process through which it is mediated. International research is clear that the quality of any education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers. Here we are talking about the “how” and the “who” of teaching and learning.

The last 5 years have seen transformations in each of the phases of teachers' learning that seek to enhance the quality of teaching and learning. These changes have been led by the Teaching Council. These include extended and reconceptualised programmes of Initial Teacher Education, *Droichead*, a new induction programme for newly qualified teachers, and *Cosán*, the first national framework for teachers' learning. Each of these areas makes clear provision for wellbeing in the context of teaching and learning.

The Department of Education and Skills also has dedicated support teams for wellbeing in the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST) as well as JCT (Junior Cycle for Teachers). There is also much private sector provision for teachers' learning in the area of wellbeing.

So it appears that we are on the cusp of making a real breakthrough in not only tackling childhood obesity, but in nurturing and supporting the overall wellbeing of students, teachers and parents in a way that will help them to thrive and be the best people they can

be. For this vision to be realised, State agencies such as the Teaching Council and the NCCA need to continue and enhance our collaboration with each other, with the Department for Education and Skills, with education support services, with all stakeholder organisations, as well as professionals and stakeholders in the health sector.

Teaching Council

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