



Opening Statement

To Joint Oireachtas Committee's for Education and Skills

At Committee's Review of Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE), 1st May 2018

Thank you for inviting ETBI to attend this Committee meeting. As mentioned in our submission, ETBI welcomes the opportunity to engage and collaborate with the Joint Committee for Education and Skills and contribute to the proposal for a review of sexual health and relationship education in schools.

As we are all aware, not only is a review long overdue, it is more than opportune in light of the dramatically changing landscape of Irish and international influences, cultural shifts and public discourse since the introduction of the initial RSE programme.

While our written submission highlights our views and concerns as a sector, it is worth stressing several salient points.

Parent Partnership

We cannot underestimate the role of parents as the primary educators and their partnership with schools. While the RSE programme guidelines have acknowledged and supported the inclusion of parent partnership to date, it is particularly important that this partnership remains at the heart of any review and updating process.

The current RSE programme sits formally and appropriately as part of the SPHE curriculum, and often permeates throughout the school environment. Indeed, the school ethos and atmosphere often create the most supportive environment for these necessary conversations to continue. The original guidelines highlight the lived experience and also the value of witnessed healthy behaviours in everyday life.

However, these lived experiences and relationships are not ring-fenced inside the school environment, but continue in social and family contexts. It is therefore vital that the parents and guardians are not only at the heart of any updated RSE programme, but work with the education partners to replicate the ‘lived experiences and healthy behaviours’ we consider so important.

Content versus process

You will note that our submission does not outline or reference a large amount of specific content. This is not without due consideration, and in fact, most of the existing overarching content is still relevant. However, we believe that, given the nature of the programme in hand and the range of experiences of all the stakeholders – students, parents, educators, experts and policy makers, content will not necessarily be the bigger challenge.

While the content will determine what we say, we believe it is through the process and interactions, specifically with students, where we have the most likely opportunity for more success. We cannot and should not be supporting new approaches in self-directed learning in the formal curriculum, without also mirroring these experiences throughout the school environment. Engaging with the real world means moving beyond the traditional classroom – to the corridors, the canteen, the sports field and the home; and using the skills, information and substance gleaned in the formal space to navigate the informal.

Urgency

Change is inevitable. The rate of change, particularly in culture and communication, since the introduction of the first RSE programme has been phenomenal. Indeed, the rate of change in the environment related to and surrounding issues of gender, sexuality, consent, and equality – to name but of a few – has at times been rapid. There is no doubt that a review is long overdue.

However, we would counsel against this urgency provoking the introduction of an updated curriculum which will not be fit for purpose. We have noted in our submission, the essential need for appropriate and adequate training to upskill our teachers. Given the rapid and wide-ranging changes already taking place in an over-crowded curriculum, we would consider it unwise to compound these challenges with a hurried programme which is under-resourced.

Similarly, a whole-school approach to RSE is essential; RSE does not belong to any one teacher but must be embedded in the culture of teaching and learning and needs to belong to *all* teachers. In conclusion, we reiterate again the need to take a considered approach about implementing a revised RSE Programme, and to prioritise support for schools along that journey.

Again, thank you for inviting ETBI to engage with the Committee on this vital and necessary process. I am happy to answer any questions you may have for me.

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