

Opening statement to Education and Skills Committee

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The IFPA has many years of experience of delivering sexuality education to young people, parents, teachers, youth workers and carers. We currently provide a range of programmes. These are generally funded through once-off initiatives or short-term projects, rather than the continuous and consistent resourcing this vital area of education requires.

As a reproductive healthcare provider, we see the impacts of poor-quality sexuality education on people's lives at first hand every day, in our pregnancy counselling centres, in our clinics and in our training workshops.

We see a profound gender inequality – it is women and girls who largely bear the burden of inadequate sexuality education and are exposed to risks of sexually transmitted infections, unintended pregnancies and gender based violence.

For these reasons, we are deeply concerned at the public health impact of inadequate, inconsistent and poor quality sexuality education in many schools in Ireland.

We have identified four areas which require immediate attention.

1. Developing a high quality comprehensive sexuality education curriculum

High quality comprehensive sexuality education facilitates the development of accurate and age appropriate knowledge, attitudes and skills. It promotes positive values, including respect for human rights, gender equality and diversity. It provides an important opportunity to reach young people with accurate information before they become sexually active, as well as offering a structured environment of learning within which to do so. It fosters attitudes and skills that contribute to safe, healthy, positive relationships throughout a person's life.

But only if the curriculum is genuinely comprehensive.

The content of RSE must be revised to reflect international best practice, particularly in relation to contraceptive use, sexually transmitted infections, abortion, sexual orientation, pornography, consent, psycho-sexual issues and gender equality.

2. Improving the status of sexuality education

RSE does not have the status and is not given the priority in schools afforded to other core subjects. Too often RSE is left to the newest member of staff and squeezed in at the end of school year.

Specialist knowledge or skills in RSE is not generally considered among the criteria for recruitment or promotion within the school system. If we are to take young people's sexual health seriously, this must change.

3. Enhancing the capacity of teachers, parents and educators

We urgently need to develop a cohort of highly skilled specialist sexuality educators—including, but not limited to primary and secondary level teachers—who can deliver comprehensive sexuality education in schools, youth groups, care homes and other settings.

These specialist educators will require on-going professional development training together with constantly updated resources so that they can address issues of concern to young people.

4. Incorporating monitoring, evaluation and quality assurance into existing structures

A quality assurance framework must be developed so that policies must be genuinely comprehensive, robustly monitored and constantly evaluated.

The Department should ensure that schools consult with experts in sexual and reproductive health education in the development of school policy. And that young people have a voice.

International best practice standards, such as UNESCO's 2017 technical guidance on sexuality education should be drawn upon in the Irish context to ensure that RSE is comprehensive, centred on the best interests of young people and will have a positive impact on their long term health and well-being.