

Joint Committee on Education and Skills

Update on Report on Positive Mental Health in Schools

Opening Statement: Minister McHugh

Minister for Education and Skills

18 October 2018

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

A Chathaoirligh,

Ba mhaith liom mo bhuíochas a ghlacadh leat féin agus le baill an Chomhchoiste Oideachais agus Scileanna de bharr na suime atá léirithe agaibh maidir le cothú na folláine agus na meabhairshláinte dearfaí sa chóras scoile. Ba mhaith liom freisin, mo bhuíochas a ghlacadh libh as ucht an chuiridh labhairt libh inniu agus an deis a thabhairt dom, an t-eolas is deireanaí ar an dul chun cinn atá déanta ag mo Roinn a roinnt libh maidir leis na moltaí a chur sibhse chun cinn i bhur dtuarascáil “ Positive Mental Health in Schools” (2017).

(Chairperson,

I would like to thank you and members of the Joint Committee on Education and Skills for the interest you have shown in the area of wellbeing promotion and positive mental health in our schools, and for your invitation to attend today, in order to update the Committee on the progress being made by my Department implementing the recommendations made in your report on ‘Positive Mental Health in Schools’ (2017).)

My statement today will primarily address:

- *The role of the Department of Education and Skills in the promotion of Wellbeing and Positive Mental Health*
- *The Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice (2018 - 2023)*

- *Progress made in relation the recommendations of the Joint Committee’s report on Positive Mental Health in Schools.*

1. The role of the Department of Education and Skills in the promotion of Wellbeing and Positive Mental Health

The promotion of wellbeing is an essential element of the ambition of the Department of Education and Skills to achieve the best education and training system in Europe by 2026. Schools and centres for education are crucial to the ongoing development of our children and young people’s wellbeing, and we are fortunate to have schools already doing so much to enhance children and young peoples’ knowledge and skills in this area.

The Department of Education and Skills has a key role to play in the promotion of the wellbeing of children and young people in Ireland, in collaboration with the Departments of Health and Children and Youth Affairs, and with other Government Departments and agencies. The promotion of wellbeing in the Education community is a priority for the Department of Education and Skills.

My Department adopts a holistic and integrated approach to supporting schools in promoting wellbeing and positive mental health. The process spans the curriculum in schools, whole-school ethos, quality of teaching, learning and assessment, student support and pastoral care and the provision of professional development for teachers. It also involves other supports such as educational psychological services and guidance services, and the interface with other agencies, both nationally and locally.

The Department of Education and Skills’ Action Plan for Education (2016-2019) set out a number of objectives and proposed actions specifically targeting the promotion of wellbeing and positive mental health in our school communities. These actions build upon and complement wellbeing promoting measures that have already been in place. They include:

- Improved curriculum content, including the introduction of the Junior Cycle Wellbeing programme

- More training for teachers and school staff, including the roll-out of evidence-based programmes to promote social and emotional competence, resilience and school connectedness
- The introduction of best practice models of school-based Student Support Teams
- An increase in the number of NEPS psychologists
- The restoration of guidance posts

Key amongst the objectives within the Action Plan for Education 2018 was the publication of the Department's Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice (2018-2023), which was launched in July 2018, providing an overarching structure encompassing existing, ongoing and developing work in the area of Wellbeing Promotion.

2. The Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice (2018-2023)

The *Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice (2018-2023)* sets out the ambition and vision of the Department of Education and Skills that, by 2023, the promotion of wellbeing will be at the core of the ethos of every school and centre for education in Ireland, that all schools will provide evidence-informed approaches and support, appropriate to need, to promote the wellbeing of their students and that Ireland will be recognised as a leader in this area.

The *Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice* describes how schools can best promote wellbeing. In practice such schools are those that recognise the importance of wellbeing promotion, where the voices of children and young people are heard, and where they experience a sense of belonging and feel safe, connected and supported. They are schools which provide children and young people with positive experiences, high-quality teaching and learning, and in which approaches to wellbeing are developed, implemented and self-evaluated. Furthermore, they are schools that can signpost students and their parents to internal and external pathways to support, as needed.

The Wellbeing Policy Statement sets out the evidence base for best practice in relation to school wellbeing promotion, which indicates that schools should adopt a whole-school,

multi-component, preventative approach to wellbeing promotion that includes both universal and targeted interventions.

A whole-school approach involves all in the school community engaging in a collaborative process to improve areas of school life that impact on wellbeing. This will be achieved through the use of a School Self-Evaluation process taking Wellbeing Promotion as its focus. It will allow schools to benchmark their practice against Indicators of Success and Statements of Effective Practice, and identify areas for development, implementation and review. It is envisaged that schools will engage with the statements and adapt and develop the best practice items as they meet the needs in their own school community.

A multi-component approach encourages schools to address areas, not only relating to teaching and learning, but also relating to other essential elements of wellbeing promotion including school culture and environment, policy and planning and relationships and partnerships. Working preventatively and providing for both universal and targeted approaches is described as providing a 'Continuum of Support'. Schools are encouraged to provide supports to promote the wellbeing of all within the school community as well as providing some targeted interventions for children and young people presenting with vulnerabilities in the area of wellbeing. These areas are embedded in the Wellbeing Framework for Practice.

It is my Department's aim that by 2023 all schools and centres for education will have embedded this dynamic School Self-evaluation process focusing on Wellbeing Promotion. The implementation of this Wellbeing Promotion Process is an ongoing process that will ensure the necessary focus on supporting children and young people in having a sense of purpose and fulfilment, and the skills necessary to deal with life's challenges.

Schools will be supported in this work by a comprehensive national professional development programme currently being developed and trialled, and a full national roll-out will commence in 2019 and run to 2023. This will include facilitating the engagement of schools in the school self-evaluation for wellbeing promotion process which will build professional capacity.

The Implementation Plan for this policy also sets goals to promote the wellbeing of teachers and to address the learning needs of current and future teachers in relation to wellbeing promotion. Work is underway to map the range of existing supports that schools can already access through the PDST, Health and Wellbeing Team, the Junior Cycle for Teachers and NEPS, with a view to ensuring that there is a comprehensive and easily-accessible set of resources to address school-identified wellbeing promotion needs. There is also a plan to develop a research based framework for the evaluation of wellbeing promotion in schools.

A Wellbeing Policy Implementation Group is in place which will coordinate activity with other Departments. This group will link with the Pathfinder Project structures when progressed. The Department collaborates in the implementation of *Healthy Ireland 2013-2025*, *Connecting for Life Strategy (2015-2020)* and *Better Outcomes Brighter Futures 2014-2020*.

3. The progress made in relation the recommendations of the Joint Committee's report on Positive Mental Health in Schools.

The Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice has incorporated some of the key recommendations of this Committee's Report on Positive Mental Health in Schools. Key recommendations in relation to whole-school approach, the importance of listening and of feeling a sense of belonging and connectedness to school are highlighted as areas to target in school wellbeing promotion. The Implementation Plan recognises the need and plans to provide for additional teacher training and the development of more resources for schools. The needs of children and young people with wellbeing vulnerabilities are also recognised, and actions that require cooperation between the Department of Education and Skills and other Departments and agencies including Health/HSE and DCYA/Tusla are included in the Implementation Plan. My Department will continue to work closely with other Departments and stakeholders to ensure that an aligned approach and continuum of services is provided to promote the positive mental health and wellbeing of all of our children and young people.

Arís, bá mhaith liom mo bhuíochas a ghlacadh leis an gCoiste as ucht an cuiridh an doiciméid seo a chur i bhur láthair agus páirt a glacadh sa phlé. Táim breá sásta aon cheist a bheadh ag baill an Choiste a fhreagairt.

(Once again I would like to thank the Committee for the invitation here today to present this paper and to contribute to the discussion. I am happy to take any questions Committee members may have.)

ENDS