

# Joint Committee on the Future of Mental Health Care

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## Opening Statement

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**27 June 2018**

Chairman,

I would like to thank you and members of the Joint Committee for the invitation to the National Educational Psychological Service, known as NEPS, to attend today to discuss Mental Health: Prevention, Early Intervention and Talk Therapy.

My statement today will primarily address:

- 1. The role of the Department of Education and Skills in relation to the promotion of Wellbeing and Positive Mental Health*
- 2. The role and purpose of the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) in relation to the promotion of Wellbeing and Positive Mental Health*

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

NEPS is a constituent section of the Department of Education and Skills, and as such, promotes and operates within the scope of the Department's policy and practices. The Department promotes a whole-school, preventative, multi-component approach to the promotion of wellbeing and positive mental health in schools. It supports the provision of interventions at both the universal level, focusing on the entire school community, and targeted levels, focusing on groups and individual young people with identified need.

In practice, schools that successfully promote wellbeing are schools in which the voice of the student is heard and students experience a sense of belonging and feel safe, connected and supported. They are schools in which students experience positive, high-quality teaching

and learning, and in which approaches to wellbeing are developed, implemented and self-evaluated. Furthermore, they are schools in which all adults listen to students, recognise the importance of wellbeing and can signpost students to internal and external pathways to support, as needed.

The Department of Education and Skills' *Action Plan for Education 2016-2019* has set out a range of objectives and proposed actions for the development and promotion of wellbeing in schools, in line with best practice. In the coming weeks Minister Bruton will publish the Department's *Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice*, in order to further support all schools in this area.

## **2. The role and purpose of the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) in relation to the promotion of Wellbeing and Positive Mental Health**

NEPS is the psychological service of the Department of Education and Skills. NEPS' goal is to support the wellbeing, and the academic, social and emotional development of all students in primary and post-primary schools through the application of psychological theory and practice in education. NEPS prioritises support for students at risk of educational disadvantage and those with special educational needs. NEPS also prioritises the promotion of the wellbeing and mental health of all students in schools.

Each NEPS psychologist has a list of assigned schools and provides a school-based support service to these schools. A major strength of NEPS service delivery is that psychologists and schools are afforded the opportunity to develop strong working relationships over time. NEPS is organised regionally with 23 offices nationwide. Currently there are 179 whole time equivalent psychologists working in the service. Fifteen more psychologists will be recruited later in 2018.

NEPS psychologists work with schools using a tiered service delivery model encompassing case work and systemic support and development work. Liaison with other agencies to ensure coordinated service delivery to students is an important element of our work. In addition, NEPS works to inform policy and practice to promote the positive mental health of our children and young people both within the Department of Education and Skills and at

cross-sectoral level. NEPS works collaboratively with schools to identify those with the greatest need, in order to provide a responsive and reactive service.

## **2.1 Individual Case Work**

Case-work is the work NEPS psychologists do with individual students who are prioritised as having the highest level of need in their school. Psychologists work in collaboration with parents and teachers, as key agents of change in the student's life. Case-work involves the assessment and identification of the student's needs. It also involves supporting schools and parents to understand the difficulties and to implement workable, evidence-informed interventions for that student. As part of that work NEPS psychologists may liaise with other service providers with whom the student may be engaged. All of these cases include elements of managing the student's wellbeing and psychological health. NEPS psychologists do not generally provide ongoing Talk Therapy as part of our interventions. In the academic year 2016/2017 NEPS psychologists were involved in casework in relation to 8,309 students, which equates to 80% of our school-based work.

## **2.2 Wellbeing Promotion/Early Intervention: NEPS Systemic Support and Development**

NEPS psychologists help to build the capacity of schools to implement best practice in relation to Wellbeing Promotion through the provision of consultation and training. At national level, NEPS currently prioritises the training of teachers in DEIS schools in three particular programmes. The first is the **Incredible Years Teacher** programme, an evidence-based programme for teachers, which strengthens social and emotional competence in primary school children. The second is the **Friends** programme, an evidence-based programme which reduces anxiety and promotes coping skills and resilience in primary and post-primary students. The third is training in the development of **Student Support Teams** in post-primary schools to coordinate supports and develop a whole-school approach to wellbeing promotion. In addition, at national level, NEPS is prioritising the training of teachers in all post-primary schools on the revised **NEPS Critical Incident: Guidelines and Resources for Schools**, which helps schools to have a plan in place to implement in the event of a critical incident.

When it is prioritised by a school, NEPS psychologists may also provide more tailored support and development to strengthen school capacity in the area of Wellbeing, to respond to individual school need.

### **2.3 Critical Incident Support**

NEPS provides direct support to schools in the event of critical incidents which overwhelm the coping mechanisms of schools. The purpose of this support is to enable schools to regain normal functioning and minimise the impact of trauma on the school community.

### **3. Conclusion**

NEPS continues to develop its thinking and approaches in this area. At present NEPS is conducting research into the current and evolving approaches to developing the skills of our students in order to promote their resilience and wellbeing. We continue to work with our partners within Education and at cross-sectoral level to further improve and align the services schools receive in this regard. Thank you 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**