



**Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education,  
Research, Innovation and Science:**

**Submission by the Ombudsman for Children's Office on  
'School Bullying and the Impact on Mental Health'  
4<sup>th</sup> May 2021**

I wish to thank the Chair for the invitation to speak before the Committee today. I want to remind the Committee that my Office made a formal submission on this topic in February this year and it has more details than I can offer in this statement.

As the Joint Committee is aware, the OCO is an independent statutory body which was established in 2004 under the Ombudsman for Children Act 2002 (2002 Act). Under the 2002 Act (as amended), the OCO has two core statutory functions:

- to promote the rights and welfare of children up to 18 years of age
- to examine and investigate complaints made by or on behalf of children about the administrative actions of public bodies, schools and voluntary hospitals that have or may have adversely affected a child

By way of background it may be of interest to the Committee to know that since 2018 the OCO has received over 400 complaints about bullying in schools, both at primary and post-primary level and this makes up almost 10% of all complaints we have received since then. In the context of our broad remit and the endless variety of complaints we receive on behalf of children and young people, this figure is significant.

The extent to which schools can be a site of bullying and the important role that schools can play, and must be supported to play, in combating bullying involving children – are important considerations for today's meeting. This is an issue that has received considerable attention from the UN Special Representative of the Secretary General on Violence Against Children<sup>1</sup> and contributed to the establishment in 2020 of the '*International Day against Violence and Bullying at School, including Cyberbullying*,'<sup>2</sup>. It is notable that the List of Issues Prior to Reporting (LOIPR) that the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (UN Committee) published in November 2020 in respect of Ireland includes a request for information about measures taken to tackle bullying, with particular reference made to cyberbullying and bullying in schools.

Based on the complaints we receive some key issues that are important to highlight for you today include:

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<sup>1</sup> For more information, go to <https://violenceagainstchildren.un.org/content/bullying-and-cyberbullying-0>.

<sup>2</sup> For more information, go to <https://en.unesco.org/commemorations/dayagainschoolviolenceandbullying>.

- there is psychological and physical bullying between young people, with a noted increase in instances of serious bullying resulting in physical and/or sexual assault
- there are challenges for schools in dealing with the more serious instances of bullying as many schools feel ill-equipped to do so
- there is a failure of some schools to report child protection and welfare issues, arising from bullying instances, to Tusla

In light of that I believe that prevention and early intervention would be greatly aided by

- training, resourcing and support measures that can strengthen the capacity of education professionals working with children and young people in schools
- co-ordinating and mainstreaming prevention and early intervention measures in and across the formal education system.

Back in 2016 our Office, as part of our report to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, encouraged the State to build on the monitoring framework contained in the *Anti-Bullying Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools* by examining schools' annual reviews of their implementation of the procedures. We hoped they would go further than just checking if there was a policy in place and start to collate specific information and data from around the country to determine the issues and solutions that were occurring in schools. This is still not happening and in light of a number of consultations we have had with children who say that within their schools they have experienced issues such as racism, homophobia and negative commentary about their mental health, we believe it is long overdue.

It is also long overdue to review the Departments *Anti-Bullying Procedures* to take account of issues such as those and cyberbullying because it may be time to start differentiating what constitutes bullying so that more refined solutions can be generated across the education system.

Before concluding, I also want to speak about the Mental Health aspect of this meeting. Instead I will repeat my call to have an independent therapist/counsellor available to every primary school in the country. This is not a unique concept and has been shown internationally to offer enormous advantages to schools and their communities by affording children the opportunity to normalise speaking to someone about their emotions or if they are feeling down.

I believe it would complement the Wellbeing Policy and Framework for Practice currently employed across the education system. It would also afford extra comfort to teachers who know they have somewhere to send their pupils who may be impacted by bereavement, separation/divorce, alcohol/addiction issues or domestic violence. Having an easily accessible therapeutic service would aid the whole school community to know they are doing their best for every child. With regard to Post Primary schools I would urge that all Career Guidance Counsellors are formally trained to provide therapy for emotional issues as well as around careers.

I must also mention the Youth Mental Health Pathfinder Project. Pathfinder was designed to take a whole of Government approach to tackling mental health issues for young people. This project was backed by 3 Departments (Education, Health and Children) but has not been progressed, an issue I have raised many, many times over the past 5 years. The implementation of Pathfinder would undoubtedly have a positive impact in tackling bullying in schools and dealing with other mental health issues affecting young people.

Finally, I am part of the Wellbeing for Teachers and Learners Group which seeks to embed a culture of wellbeing across the whole school community and this group has members from the Irish Primary Principals Network, the National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals, the Teaching Council and the National Parents Council (Primary). We believe that we need to engage the whole school community (Parents, Teachers, staff and children) to help reduce or prevent mental health issues within education and that must include supporting our teachers and other school staff to be emotionally aware and present for each other as well as the staff. If our school staff are not safe and secure in their wellbeing then our children will be impacted.

Thank you for your invitation to speak today and I am happy to take questions if required.