

**Mr. Matthew Ryan, Welfare Officer, Irish
Second-Level Student's Union**

Opening Statement

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

18th May 2021

Go raibh maith agat a Cathaoirleach and members of the committee and thank you for the opportunity to speak before you today. My name is Matthew Ryan and I'm the Welfare Officer of the Irish Second-Level Students' Union, or the ISSU.

Today, I want to express my views on how we can implement long lasting solutions as opposed to incremental "quick fixes" to bullying. One thing that has always been apparent is that with issues like bullying, we often try to work from the top down and eradicate the issue as a whole. Instead, I want to highlight the importance of the straightforward and pragmatic actions that, when combined, could yield a much more practical and useful solution.

We can begin to build the groundwork of a more accepting and inclusive school culture if we tackle issues such as our RSE and SPHE curriculums, investigate and improve our Referral System, look to how we can fully support our staff and pastoral care teams and implementing a more holistic and realistic approach to education.

A lack of education can lead to animosity so we need to teach our students as soon as they enter education about real world issues and use practical up to date language. Language is vitally important when it comes to tackling bullying. The use of passive slurs and derogatory language in schools normalises the victimisation of certain groups. The passing of a simple snide remark can often snowball into full on bullying. We need an education that is constantly adapting and evolving to the vernacular and vocabulary of each generation, something which is constantly changing.

It is also the belief that no one becomes a bully for no reason. A reform not reprimand approach is needed. This aims to help students who have bullied to learn and grow personally and help them in becoming more open and accepting of others. We need to help both victims and perpetrators in this scenario. We all have a duty to make every effort possible to help re-educate students who have bullied so that they do not repeat this behaviour.

But where do we start? The role of the parent or guardian in this process cannot be understated. It is crucial that we upskill parents to help them become the key parties in tackling bullying that they can be.

It is also vital that we look at the Mental Health aspect of this. Being the victim of bullying can manifest itself as intrusive or self destructive thoughts. It can cause a young person's belief in themselves to waiver. They have thoughts of "Why me?" "What did I do?" "What's wrong with me?" We need to support these students and equip them with the proper coping mechanisms they need.

Private psychotherapists can be expensive and this issue is particularly prevalent amongst young people of more disadvantaged backgrounds. I ask the committee to look into how we can better equip our pastoral care teams to deal with serious cases of bullying and ask that all educational stakeholders and the NEPS are engaged in this process.

I would also urge the committee to look at the Mental Health funding available. In 2021, only €50 million, or 1%, of the overall budget was

allocated to mental health services. This needs to improve. There is dire need of greater funding but also for better management of how and where it is spent. Sometimes we default to the typical posters or awareness campaigns and the truth is these are often not enough.

I also ask that the committee work to aid the establishment of student councils across the country as they provide invaluable insight to a school when they are drafting or reviewing their bullying policies.

Finally, I want to finish with the message that we need to have strong, solid foundations before we can build anything on them. We need to look at the way we educate as a whole. The tangible solutions mentioned above and in our written submission are but a start.

I'd like to welcome any and all questions the committee may have.

Go raibh míle maith agaibh.