

Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI) opening statement to the Joint
Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and
Science

on

“School Bullying and The Impact on Mental Health”.

25th May 2021

On behalf of Education and Training Boards Ireland, and the 16 Education and Training Boards (ETBs) that ETBI represents, I am very pleased to make this statement to the Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science on the topic of School Bullying and the Impact on Mental Health.

ETBs are statutory authorities which have responsibility for education and training, youth work and a range of other statutory functions. ETBs manage and operate community national schools, second-level schools, further education colleges, and a range of adult and further education centres in communities throughout Ireland.

While our initial written submission highlights the views and experiences of the sector in more detail, the following outlines some of the more significant observations.

The parallel issues of bullying and mental health have never been more to the fore, particularly in recent months, as we all navigate the new and old spaces that have been occupied as part of our sector’s ongoing response to education provision. Research informs us of the significant impact of bullying on mental health in ‘normal’ circumstances and this has no doubt been compounded in different ways as we tackle our Covid response. In addition, the relationship between bullying and mental health is further challenged by the reality that some young people are bullied because of their mental health issues and some develop mental health issues because of being bullied.

The policies and practices of anti-bullying procedures in schools under the patronage of Education and Training Boards, at both Primary and Post Primary level, are directed

in the first instance by Department of Education guidelines and circulars. Additional materials and resources are accessed through the aligned support agencies such as the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment and the Professional Development Service for Teachers to name two.

As mentioned in our longer written submission, ETBI also wishes to acknowledge, and reaffirm, the significance of school culture as an important influence on tackling bullying at local level. The ETB core values of Care, Respect and Equality lay the foundation for a responsive approach at individual, collective and community level, for tackling both bullying and any aligned mental health impacts.

In addition to incorporating Department of Education policy and its aligned requirements, schools in the ETB sector also endeavour to engage in whole sector approaches which demonstrate and adopt diversity of engagement. These models of practice originate both within and outside of the formal education sector and aim to embed a preventative approach where possible. These engagements include the Goodness Me, Goodness You programme, which underpins the Community National School policy to respect and recognise diversity, the Instructional Leadership Programme, which supports schools to facilitate the voice of the learner and ETB schools' engagement in the BeLongTo – Safe and Supportive Schools programme embracing a Whole School Community Model designed to create schools that are fully inclusive of LGBTI+ young people.

As acknowledgement and recognition of local and cultural context, many individual ETBs and indeed schools supplement specific elements of existing programmes with Transition year, Leaving Certificate Applied, and as part of individual subject specifications across the formal. In the informal and non-formal school community, student support and the impact of 'one good adult' can be witnessed through activities aligned to Wellbeing Provision Mapping, extracurricular, cross curricular and community links as well as contribution to and from parents and guardians. Structured local programmes are also utilised where appropriate such as the Empathy Education Programme and, Restorative Justice Approach.

While the ETB sector endeavours to be responsive and pre-emptive in its approach to bullying and any mental health impacts, it will also continue to advocate for additional beneficial supports aligned to these issues. Our current recommendations request the

timely development of school-based resources related to online harassment and harmful communications as well as initiatives which support the resilience and positive mental health of our Principals, Deputy Principals, Teachers, and support staff.

In conclusion, it can be difficult to identify when students in our care are involved in bullying, whether as the person being bullied, the perpetrator, or both, and there are many ways that a young person can be affected both within and outside the school setting. Continuing to advocate for and assist in supporting students through any aligned mental health challenges that may affect them as a result of bullying, is a priority for all partners in the ETB sector.

We would like to thank you for inviting ETBI to engage with the Committee on these issues and affording us the opportunity to reflect the varying impacts and experiences of the ETB sector.