



CPSMA Opening Statement to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, on the topic “School Bullying and The Impact on Mental Health”

CPSMA welcomes this opportunity to take part in a round table with the Joint Oireachtas Committee on “School Bullying and the Impact on Mental Health.” CPSMA is the management support organisation for Catholic Primary Schools. Since the school closure in March of last year we dealt with over 15,000 queries from approx. 2400 schools.

Firstly, I would like to say at the outset that I believe that schools are putting a huge amount of time and effort into proactive strategies to make school environments as welcoming and inclusive as they are and that those strategies are working, according to the vast majority of children in our schools themselves.

Schools have comprehensive SPHE curricular plans where the focus is on building relationships and developing skills needed for children to engage with each other. Many schools also engage in the Friends for Life, Incredible years and other whole school programmes to build resilience and foster good relationships.

Wellbeing is at the heart of many schools’ School Self Evaluation process and initiatives such as restorative practices, wellbeing and friendship weeks, buddy benches, amber flag schemes among others help promote the values of respect and tolerance as well as educating children around how to engage appropriately with others.

This work is paying off. As the latest Chief Inspectors’ report notes *“Primary schools were found to be managing their pupils well and the vast majority of parents are happy with their child’s school. In particular, questionnaire results from pupils and parents indicate a very high level of satisfaction with the arrangements in place in many schools to promote positive relationships and to tackle bullying.”*

The Growing up in Ireland study also found that *“A very large majority of 9-year-olds (93%) said they liked school”* which, I would suggest is a huge change from how school was experienced in times gone by.

We also all remember the many images of smiling and joyous children delighted to be returning to school buildings in the media last September, reinforcing the importance and value of primary education for children’s socialisation as well as education.

However, relationships are complex and require work on an ongoing basis. If they do break down for whatever reason, all schools have anti-bullying procedures in line with Circular 45/2013 to deal with, which are annually reviewed.

When a report comes to a school either through observation or from a pupil or parent, schools follow their policy. This would entail an investigation of the alleged incident where the class teacher and/or principal would talk to the parties involved. Break down in relationships is a very complex matter. It can take time to establish what is actually occurring and whether bullying is substantiated or not, the school engages with both parties to repair and restore the relationship using restorative practices. Schools do a lot of good work in this area. It can provide opportunities for healing.

Schools are experiencing a rise in interpersonal issues which are occurring outside of school on social media. There is an obligation to deal with these matters in school in certain circumstances as part of the anti-bullying procedures, which can be extremely challenging as the school has no control of what happens when pupils leave the school grounds. Schools are also reporting to us that these issues are taking up more and more time at the expense of teaching and learning.

Recommendations

While schools are implementing the procedures laid out, targeted training should be provided for teachers and boards of management around the educational responsibilities for schools, strategies to deal with investigations and restorative practices to resolve such issues.

Training for parents also needs to be provided to help them support their children in building and maintaining relationships and also to educate them on how the anti-bullying procedures are implemented by schools.

A review of the Department of Education's Anti-bullying Procedures (2013) should take place, in consultation with school communities.

Finally, I would make the point that schools require increased support in dealing with mental health issues in general. The presence of NEPS psychologists is now rarer than the cornflake, while a referral to CAMH's can take up to 18 months. This is neither fair to children or schools and should be addressed as a matter of urgency.

Thank you.