

**JOINT COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION, FURTHER AND HIGHER EDUCATION,  
RESEARCH, INNOVATION AND SCIENCE – 22 June 2021**

**School Bullying and the Impact on Mental Health:**

**Opening Statement**

I thank the Chairman and committee members for its invitation to officials from the Department of Education to contribute to the work that the Committee is undertaking in the area of anti-bullying and mental health.

Bullying is a complex and difficult issue that can occur in many different settings including schools. Bullying by its nature transcends boundaries and places. It can occur in school, in our homes, in wider family circles, social groups youth clubs and sporting activities.

Schools can play a transformative role in the lives of young people. The Department's Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice seeks to promote the mental health and wellbeing of all children and young people. It is largely preventative in focus, and seeks to reduce the risk factors and promote the protective factors for wellbeing in the school community. The provision of a positive school culture where children and young people experience a sense of safety, belonging and connectedness is a key protective factor. So too is the opportunity to experience positive and respectful relationships across the entire school community. These preventative approaches provide an essential environmental context to raising awareness amongst the entire school community that bullying is unacceptable behaviour, regardless of where it occurs, and is central to a coherent, school-wide approach to tackling bullying.

The anti-bullying procedures for schools were developed in consultation with education partners in response to the National Action Plan on Bullying in 2013.

They are designed to give direction and guidance to school personnel in preventing and tackling school-based bullying by promoting a positive school culture and climate that is welcoming of difference and diversity and is based on inclusivity and respect. By implementing effective preventative strategies and reducing risk factors, the opportunities and instances of bullying can be greatly reduced thereby impacting positively on mental health.

Under the anti-bullying procedures every school is required to formally adopt and have in place a published, readily accessible anti-bullying policy. Schools must set out in their policy the procedures for investigating and dealing with bullying and the school's procedures for the formal noting and recording of bullying behaviour. Where bullying occurs the key focus is to resolve issues and work to restore as far as is practicable the relationships of the parties involved.

The anti-bullying procedures contain important oversight measures to strengthen accountability within schools for both preventing and dealing with bullying behaviour. The school principal must report regularly to the Board of Management setting out the overall number of bullying cases and confirmation that all of these cases have been, or are being, dealt with. Boards of Management must also undertake an annual review of the school's anti-bullying policy and its implementation.

An important part of the overarching oversight measures are a range of inspections types carried out by Department's Inspectorate. Inspection models have been adapted to include more evidence gathering concerning the effectiveness of the school's actions to create a positive school culture and to prevent and tackle bullying.

The Department's Inspectorate is currently reviewing how it evaluates schools' implementation of anti-bullying measures with a view to developing further how such evaluation can be carried out in an in-depth and focused way. This includes carrying out research in this area involving consultation with parents, students and other stakeholders.

Bullying behaviour can also be influenced in a positive manner through a range of curricular initiatives such as SPHE (Social, Personal, Health Education). The SPHE curriculum includes the

resource, *Growing Up LGBT* and by participating in LGBT awareness events schools can address homophobic and transphobic bullying. In addition an annual grant has been provided by the Department to BeLonG To Youth Services to support delivery of the Stand Up! Campaign to address homophobic and transphobic bullying in schools and the serious impact it can have on the mental health of LGBTI+ students.

At primary level, the Stay Safe programme is a personal safety skills programme which seeks to enhance children's self-protection skills including their ability to recognise and cope with bullying. The Relationship and Sexuality Education (RSE) programme at post-primary level provides opportunities to explore and discuss areas such as human sexuality and relationships, which have particular relevance to identity-based bullying. The wider curriculum provides space and opportunities to foster an attitude of respect for all: to promote the value of diversity; to address prejudice and stereotyping and to highlight the unacceptability of bullying behaviour.

There are extensive training and curricular supports available to schools in this area. The Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST) have a dedicated Health and Wellbeing team who support schools and teachers to create a positive school culture. The CPD support range includes SPHE, Child Protection, Stay Safe programme workshops as well as RSE Curriculum, Anti-Bullying, Personal Safety, Internet Safety and Teacher Wellbeing support. Individualised bespoke school support in the area of anti-bullying is also available.

The Department's National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) also supports the wellbeing, and academic, social and emotional development of all children and young people, through the provision of its casework service and the provision of a range of teacher professional learning opportunities.

Funding is also provided on an annual basis to the National Parents Council for the delivery of anti-bullying training workshops for parents, including, cyberbullying.

The Department also provides annual funding to the National Anti-Bullying Research and Resource Centre (ABC) in Dublin City University towards its research and training

programmes. I am aware that representatives from the Centre have already briefed the Committee on their activities.

The safe use of the internet and preventing cyber bullying is of critical importance. Webwise.ie which is funded by the Department of Education is an important resource in this area. However online safety involves a whole of Government response.

The 2018 Government Action Plan for Online Safety involves six Government Departments working in partnership to deliver on actions impacting on Online Safety for every user of the internet. Of particular note was the establishment in 2018 of the National Advisory Council for Online Safety (NACOS) whose role includes providing advice to Government on online safety issues. In addition the ***Online Safety and Media Regulation Bill*** is currently in Pre-Legislative Scrutiny and is expected to be enacted later this year.

The Committee will be aware that the Education (Student and Parent Charter Bill) 2019 is currently awaiting an order for second stage in the Dáil. The overall aim of this legislation is to foster a more inclusive culture in all schools by improving the level of engagement between the school community and by developing a listening culture in the school which is really important in this area.

The Department understands that the Committee, following on from its meetings and research in this area intends to publish a report on anti-bullying and mental health and it is hoped that the Department will be able to assist the Committee in its work today.

**ENDS**