

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

“Mental Health Supports in Schools and Tertiary Education”.

18TH. October 2022

Introduction

Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI) welcomes the invitation by the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science to contribute to the Committee’s examination on *“Mental Health Supports in Schools and Tertiary Education”*.

Education and Training Boards (ETBs), statutorily established on 1 July 2013, have responsibility for education and training, youth work and a range of other statutory functions. As of August 2022, ETBs are patrons of twenty-seven Community National Schools (CNS), and one third of all second level schools in Ireland providing quality multi-denominational second level education to over 100,000 students.

The sixteen Education & Training Boards provide a wide range of programmes and services for a diverse range of individuals in primary, post-primary and tertiary education spread across each geographical region serving local communities and businesses. This combination of geographical scope and local focus provides ETBs with a unique place in responding to learner needs and can prepare courses in real time to act quickly to respond to skills gaps in areas of demand. The delivery of Further Education and Training in ETBs is guided by the FET Strategy (2020-2024), an ambitious programme aimed at supporting the economy through targeted reskilling and upskilling initiatives around the core pillars of building skills, fostering inclusion and facilitating pathways.

1. Background

As patrons of multid denominational and co-educational schools at both primary and post-primary level, ETBs pride themselves on welcoming and catering for learners from diverse backgrounds. All ETB schools, as state schools, are firmly rooted in their local communities with an ethos underpinned by core values (figure 1)



Figure 1 ETB Core Values

ETB schools aim to provide inclusive, learner-centred, and holistic quality learning and teaching environments, and support all students to reach their full-potential. Central to this philosophy is full access and engagement, using approaches and methodologies that ensure optimum outcomes for young people. In addition to their academic needs, the modern school community endeavours to support students with a range of challenges, such as mental health issues, often resulting in disengagement with the learning process.

2. ETBI/ETB Primary and Post Primary Schools Mental Health Supports

It is generally accepted that schools are inadequately resourced and supported to support students' mental health. Schools were already severely challenged prior to COVID-19 in terms of supporting mental health. However, the past two years have brought additional challenges in responding to emerging students' mental health needs. This is evidenced in a recent NPC survey which found that 20% of parents have sought mental health supports for their primary school aged children over the past two years. In addition, referrals to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) have also increased by 40% between 2011 and 2019.

It is widely acknowledged that early intervention is key in preventing children from developing more complex mental health issues later in life. Schools, when adequately resourced, play a vital role in the promotion of positive mental health. However, there is a significant lack of mental health services available at school level, with no formal access routes to in-school counselling service in primary schools. In addition, there are no formal structures in all primary schools regarding supporting students' mental health. Unlike post-primary level where schools are guided by the Department of Education establishing and running Student Support Teams, no such guidance exists at primary level. While establishing a Student Support Team may pose challenges for smaller primary schools, this should be considered in primary schools in different contexts. This could be achieved through a consultation process with the relevant bodies at primary level.

At post-primary level, Guidance Counsellors provide services to the best of their ability. However, many lack the training in more therapeutic counselling to address the significant mental health needs of students. They also have a limited amount of time to provide any form of counselling services. Many schools at both primary and post-primary level have significant difficulties accessing supports for students with serious mental health issues, such as suicidal ideation or eating disorders, from the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). There are over 2000 young people on CAMHS waiting lists at any one time. While awaiting these services, students' mental health deteriorates or suffers more serious mental health issues later on. Ultimately, these issues fall upon the school to address no matter the level of resources or expertise. This is significant considering the UN's findings that Ireland has the 4th highest level of teenage suicide in the developed world. Early interventions at primary level would lead to a significant reduction in the complexity of need arising for students.

Research consistently shows school-based counselling to have a significant impact on reducing the level of mental health services required later by children. The Ombudsman for Children, Dr Niall Muldoon, has previously made a recommendation to this Committee to make independent therapists and counsellors available in every school as well as the need to expand the remit of the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) to include school-based counselling services. Indeed, this Committee, in previous reports, recognises mental health supports as an integral part of school-based counselling. ETBI supports these recommendations.

3. Coordination of Services and establishment of links between HSE Services and the Education System

Primary and Post Primary Schools

Fundamentally, ETBI is of the view that a child-centred approach to mental health services is needed. Currently, various mental health services are working in isolation. This leads to ad-hoc rather than a systemic, approach to supports available to schools. While many schools have developed excellent relationships with mental health support services such as CAMHS, Jigsaw, and local Resource Centres, many report that outside these services, they are unaware of the supports each other provide. Parents/schools who are concerned about their children's/students' mental health may reach out to numerous support services. As different organisations have varying levels of awareness of the work of other mental health services, the student may experience a duplication of supports in some areas and not enough in others. In Kerry, for example, a number of agencies (E.g., NEPS, Counselling Services and Jigsaw) have been brought together to provide training to Student Support Teams in post-primary schools in the county. This multi-disciplinary approach to training (led by NEPS) has led to significant improvements in the ways Student Support Teams in the county operate.

On a national level, although the Department of Education has issued useful guidelines for Student Support Teams in Post-Primary Schools, systematic, ongoing training is needed. This training (provided by a multi-disciplinary led by NEPS) would have a significant impact on the effectiveness of Student Support Teams.

Principals report being aware of, or approached by, various different mental health initiatives. However, this raises challenges for school leaders in terms of identifying the most appropriate mental health initiatives in which to get involved. They are often nervous about making such decisions given the serious nature of the work and the potential consequence of ineffective or poor-quality mental health initiatives. Many do not feel qualified to make such decisions. ETBI is of the view that running a mental health initiative should need approval from a national body such as the Department of Education or NEPS (who have clear criteria for approval) so that schools can be confident that initiatives provided by non-state bodies provide effective, evidence-based supports to students most in need. In addition, newly appointed principals may not become aware of local mental health services for some time.

4. Student Engagement and Peer Supports

Primary and Post Primary Schools

ETBI and ETBs are experienced in facilitating numerous Professional Learning Networks (PLNs) at both local and national level on various issues e.g., teaching and learning, IT, ethos etc. PLNs provide opportunities for teachers/school leaders to meet (either in-person or online) to get expert inputs on the particular area of focus and more importantly to share best practice. PLNs are facilitated by somebody with a particular interest/expertise in the area the PLN has been established to address.

Schools, at both primary and post-primary level, would benefit enormously from being part of a PLN on mental health. The PLN could be led by an organisation such as NEPS but involve other relevant mental health agencies. Schools could nominate a lead person to engage with the PLN and bring the learning and experiences shared at the PLN back to the schools' staff. This model has proven extremely effective in many areas in the ETB sector. For this to be a success investment is needed. Teachers would need to be released in order to attend PLNs and provide training to their own staff. While investment is needed, such supports would ensure

that students with mental health difficulties are supported effectively by the school, reducing the need to receive more costly supports from the state further down the line.

5. Teacher Training and Development including relevant staff in Tertiary Education

Primary and Post Primary Schools

Mental health ought to be a fundamental aspect of all Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programmes. The current review of the “CEIM: Standards for Initial Teacher Education” provides an ideal opportunity to embed this into all ITE programmes. Investment needs to be prioritised in ensuring that all teachers are adequately trained (on an ongoing basis) to identify students/families who are struggling in terms of mental health and the most appropriate ways to support them. While NEPS endeavour to provide such training to schools, they are currently under-resourced to do so at the levels now required. In addition, at post-primary level, although Social Personal Health Education (SPHE) is one of the core subjects that schools will deliver to meet the requirement of 400 hours of ‘wellbeing’ at Junior Cycle, there is currently no recognised teaching qualification in SPHE. Many teachers currently teaching SPHE at post-primary level are unqualified to do so. This is significant considering the potential and delicate and sensitive nature of this subject. ETBI welcomes the recent announcement by the Minister for Education regarding the provision of new postgraduate upskilling programmes for post-primary SPHE/RSE teachers.

6. International Experience and Best practice

Primary and Post Primary Schools

In terms of international experience and best practice in primary and post-primary schools, ETBI joins with the INTO, IPPN and the Ombudsman for Children in supporting the National Parents’ Council (NPC) and St Patrick’s Mental Services’ campaign for the establishment of school-based Mental Health Support Teams. This campaign is based on the successful introduction of this initiative in the UK. ETBI is aware that this Committee has been made aware of this initiative and is planning on seeing first-hand how this is being rolled out later this year. While this campaign focuses on primary schools, ETBI is of the view that this would be equally as appropriate at post-primary level.

7. Recommendations

Level	Recommendations:
Primary Level	– A consultation with primary stakeholders on the possibilities of establishing Student Support Teams and the supports required at primary level.
Post-Primary Level	– A systemic, interdisciplinary approach to the training of Student Support Teams at post-primary level.
Primary and Post-Primary Levels	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – The establishment of Professional Learning Networks on mental health led by NEPS but involving a number of relevant mental health services. Substitution cover to be made available for attendance at PLNs. – A mechanism to be developed to accredit mental health initiatives so that schools can be confident that the initiatives rolled out in their schools are evidence-based and effective. – Increased investment in NEPS so that they can provide the training required by school staff to identify and respond effectively to mental health issues. Also the expansion of the remit of NEPS to include counselling services. – Further exploration of the establishment of school-based Mental Health Support Teams (learning from UK context).

8. Conclusion

Research on mental illness and mental disabilities in recent years had been known to be largely unexplored, showing the importance of robust data concerning mental health in support of learners. More evidence is required in the European and national contexts for the kind of interventions and supports that are appropriate for learners. This in turn would mean the evaluation of existing support systems against the needs of students and learners across schools at both primary and post-primary level. Research-backed, evidence-based evaluations of how supports align with mental health needs for learners would provide more suitable grounds for establishing the foundations of strong mental health support that is likely to be meaningful and sustainable.

On behalf of ETBI I wish to acknowledge the members for giving us the opportunity to present and address on this key and fundamental issue for school children and young people.