



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

Opening statement: Michael Kelly, Founder & CEO, GIY

Mental Health Supports in Schools and Tertiary Education

22<sup>nd</sup> November 2022

Thank you for your invitation to appear before the Committee today. As identified by the Government of Ireland's Wellbeing Policy Statement & Framework for Practice, wellbeing should be considered 'as both an enabler of learning and an outcome of learning'. To that end, I am delighted to be here today to represent GROW At School, a garden-based food education programme for Primary Schools.

We have a once in a lifetime opportunity now to embed food growing and food system knowledge within our primary education system. The primary school students of today are the generation that will experience the strongest impacts of climate change. It is critical that we provide these students with the tools, knowledge and life skills to support their wellbeing into the future.

### **The GROW At School Programme**

For those of you who are not familiar with GIY; GIY (or Grow It Yourself) are a social enterprise supporting people to live healthier, happier lives by growing some of their own food. GIY have supported food growing and education programmes in primary schools across Ireland and the UK since 2014. Over 1 million school children and 55% of primary schools in Ireland have taken part in a GIY food growing programme. GIY were invited by Healthy Ireland to join the Food In School Forum to provide leadership and guidance in helping children to make healthy food choices.

GROW AT School is a programme that integrates food literacy and education through the primary school curriculum, supporting sustainable behaviours and health & wellbeing. It has been developed with the expertise of horticulturalists, educational specialists and teachers.

The solution itself is simple

- Primary schools receive a school garden kit with all the materials for 4 raised beds.
- Students learn how to grow 14 vegetables in the school environment, under a growing plan that is designed to grow and harvest in line with the school year.
- Teachers take GIY's School Garden course to provide them with the training and skills to facilitate growing at school.
- Lesson plans and teaching resources are provided, and teachers invited to join a community of GROW At School teachers nationwide.

### **GROW At School Supporting Mental Health & Wellbeing**

Food growing is an important climate mitigation activity that saves carbon and protects biodiversity. It is important within this context to note for this Committee that negative emotions relating to climate change are commonly reported anxieties and worries amongst children (*Baker et al 2020*). A



garden environment is, however, one that is proven to support learning, resilience, hope, health, positivity & wellbeing.

Putting a seed into soil teaches children the understanding of where food comes from, the benefits of eating healthy, nutritious food, and an increased appreciation of the connection between healthy diets and healthy minds.

For this reason, I'm here today to talk to you about GROW At School as a cross-functional mental health support and service for our primary schools, and one that fits into a psychosocial model of wellbeing.

Firstly, from a health perspective;

Gardens are recognized as places of **learning, inclusion, equality, joy, connection, healing and celebration** (*Dr. Sandra Austin, Senior Lecturer in Social, Environmental and Scientific Education at Marino Institute of Education*).

There are **proven physical and mental benefits of engaging with the soil**. Our research shows that 59% of people who grow food report improvements to mental well-being, 42% increased social connection, and 68% more aware of physical benefits (*GIY National Survey 2021*). Teachers from the programme to date speak of the sensory benefits children report – such as smelling herbs and working with the soil. They even love weeding!

The wellbeing benefits of gardening are supported by scientific evidence. There are 'happiness-boosting bugs' in soil called mycobacterium vaccae. 'Inhaling those bugs boosts serotonin and makes you feel more confident, more positive and more creative' (*Dr Mark Rowe, founder of Waterford Health Park*).

A garden provides a *whole school* approach to supporting well-being and mental health in children – an approach outlined by NEPS guidelines that helps in addressing behavioural, emotional and social difficulties. A school garden acts as both a formal and an informal teaching tool, providing for a balance of activities, and opportunities for experiential, hands-on learning in a positive & fun environment.

In terms of wellbeing;

Teachers taking part in GROW At School report that the programme supports a sense of **belonging and connectedness**—both recognised as important wellbeing protective factors for children. The garden provides an opportunity for interaction in an informal setting, and inclusivity amongst students.

Spending time in nature **boosts resilience** in children. The garden is a holistic teaching tool that provides solitude and the opportunity for reflection.

- School gardens support the 5 key principles recommended by NEPS to promote resilience and recovery; feeling calm, feeling that 'I belong', feeling hopeful, feeling safe, feeling 'I can manage'.
- Garden-based learning supports wellbeing by minimising alienation, providing an environment that supports language barriers, differing cultural backgrounds, trauma or



other challenges a student may face. Particularly timely if we consider the wellbeing of children from war-affected countries.

Finally, food growing supports **behaviour change** – both in school and at home. We know from our research that when children start growing food, it changes their knowledge, behaviour & attitudes – both to food, and to their role in the food system. The implementation of GROW At School as a national programme at primary school level will ensure that we reach children at a crucial stage in their development. Children start to develop habits as early as 9 years old. Introducing positive, healthy habits in their formative years is crucial to long-term behaviour change in their food choices, climate consciousness, and overall lifestyle.

### Key Recommendations

GROW At School has been piloted as a programme for 4 years and is ready for scale. GIY are currently providing the GROW At School programme in 132 primary schools across Ireland and aim to roll out the programme to 1,600 schools by 2024. We envisage every primary school in Ireland growing food by 2030.

Our recommendations to the Committee are:

- Implementation of **GROW At School as a national food growing programme** for Primary Schools that supports mental health and wellbeing.
- **Departmental funding for GROW At School as a health & wellbeing initiative** delivered through public/social enterprise partnership to address Programme For Government objectives.
- Support the development of **curriculum linked lesson plans** in collaboration with the HSE Health and Wellbeing Team and with the support of mental health experts.
- Support **programme evaluation and expansion to post-primary education** within a 3-5 year timeframe.

GROW At School can be an effective national programme that meets multiple objectives and action points outlined in the Programme for Government; from the establishment of a primary school healthy eating education programme; to the availability of nutritious, locally sourced food; to minimising food waste; to promoting biodiversity. It directly and immediately meets the Programme for Government action under Theme 1 Action point 1.2 to “Implement School Gardens” to encourage schools and colleges to provide access to land where students can grow their own food”.

GROW At School promotes healthy behaviours, supports wellbeing and provides a hands-on experience that teaches students that they can be their own agents for change. It is a programme that can integrate with, or enhance, existing initiatives. We invite you to support this programme and partner with us in providing a positive, practical and pro-active solution that promotes wellbeing and supports mental health.

To conclude with the words of teacher who registered for this year’s Programme:

*"I feel growing at school would help the children understand the importance of making healthy choices and highlight for them the value of sustainability. Gardening allows children to experience success at growing, as well as often being a calming, rewarding activity for all. For children who need that break from academic subjects and more hands-on activities out of the classroom, it can provide*



*them with the release they need... Gardening could provide some of these children with the sensory break they need and help them self-regulate. Hopefully drawing on parental involvement and expertise would help further knit the school community together and foster a sense of wellbeing for all."*

Thank you for your attention, and I look forward to answering any questions the Committee members may have.

Michael Kelly