

# DÁIL ÉIREANN

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## AN COMHCHOISTE UM LEANAÍ AGUS GNÓTHAÍ ÓIGE

## JOINT COMMITTEE ON CHILDREN AND YOUTH AFFAIRS

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*Dé Céadaoin, 16 Bealtaine 2018*

*Wednesday, 16 May 2018*

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Tháinig an Comhchoiste le chéile ag 9.30 a.m.

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The Joint Committee met at 9.30 a.m.

Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair / Members present:

Teachtaí Dála / Deputies	Seanadóirí / Senators
Denise Mitchell,	Colm Burke,+
Tom Neville.	Catherine Noone.

+ In éagmais le haghaidh cuid den choiste / In the absence for part of the meeting of Senator Catherine Noone.

Teachta / Deputy Anne Rabbitte sa Chathaoir / in the Chair.

## **Business of Joint Committee**

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Anne Rabbitte):** We have a quorum and will commence in public session. I welcome Ms Maud de Boer-Buquiccio, the UN special rapporteur on the sale and sexual exploitation of children, who is in the Visitors Gallery. A number of the members met earlier with Ms de Boer-Buquiccio and had the opportunity to discuss her brief. She has now served four years of a six year term and has brought emphasis in respect of ICT patterns, international illegal adoption and commercial surrogacy. We discussed the migration of children and the undocumented. We also discussed what the committee could focus on into the future. In the context of previous discussions with the Minister for Justice and Equality and the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, the adoption tracing Bill and the guardian *ad litem* system were raised. The UN special rapporteur expressed a particular interest in the issue of child protection in the context of Ireland's ratification of the optional protocol to the Convention of the Rights of the Child on the sale of children, child prostitution and pornography and the Lanzarote Convention as well as child protection in the context of children's institutions, the Roma community and exceptions to 18 as the legal age for marriage, past illegal adoptions and children's rights in general. During our discussions in private session earlier, we also referred to the issues of mother and baby homes, the Magdalen laundries and survivors of same in order that Ms de Boer-Buquiccio be made aware of the work we are doing here in Ireland to address historical issues and to get redress for those affected.

Members of the Joint Committee on Children and Youth Affairs share an interest in the matters that Ms de Boer-Buquiccio has brought to our attention, including in particular the matter of ICT-related abuse. This committee published a report recently on cybersecurity for children and young people. We spent approximately six months preparing that report, with all vested interests making presentations to the committee. We heard from those representing the voice of the child, from teachers, parents and the ICT industry. One of our finer moments was a meeting attended by four Government Ministers. We met the Ministers for Communications, Climate Action and Environment, Justice and Equality, Education and Skills, and Children and Youth Affairs who spent a lot of time with us, listening to our findings and taking them on board. That was a very successful meeting. Cybersecurity is not just an issue for one Department but straddles several which is why that meeting was so important. I will now present Ms Maud de Boer-Buquiccio with a copy of the committee's report.

We will suspend the meeting briefly to allow the witnesses for our next session to take their seats.

*Sitting suspended at 9.45 a.m. and resumed at 9.55 a.m.*

## **Tackling Childhood Obesity: Discussion (Resumed)**

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Anne Rabbitte):** I wish everybody a good morning. What normally does not happen here has happened this morning, in that we have a slight technical problem. If members and witnesses wish to speak, they must press the button in front of them.

That will mean only one person can speak at a time, as otherwise the microphones will not pick up their contributions. That will mean we will have a very courteous meeting, which will be good. I thank everyone for agreeing to that.

I welcome everybody to this meeting of the committee, which is a resumed hearing on the topic of tackling childhood obesity. This morning we will hear from representatives of the Teaching Council, the National Parents Council Post-Primary, the Association of Secondary Teachers in Ireland, ASTI, the Irish National Teachers Organisation, INTO, and the Teachers Union of Ireland TUI. I welcome to the meeting Mr. Tomás Ó Ruairc, director, and Ms Carmel Kearns, the Teaching Council; Mr. Geoffrey Browne, National Parents Council Post-Primary; Ms Maeve McCafferty, education and research official, Irish National Teachers Organisation; Mr. David Duffy, education-research officer, Teachers Union of Ireland; and Ms Moira Leydon, assistant general secretary, Association of Secondary Teachers in Ireland. I thank them for appearing before the committee this morning and for their patience with us earlier. I also welcome all the members and the viewers who may be watching these proceedings on Oireachtas TV to this public session of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Children and Youth Affairs.

Before we commence, in accordance with procedure, I am required to draw attention to the fact that by virtue of section 17(2)(I) of the Defamation Act 2009, witnesses are protected by absolute privilege in respect of their evidence to the committee. However, if a witness is directed by the committee to cease giving evidence in regard to a particular matter and continues to do so, the witness is entitled thereafter only to a qualified privilege in respect of his or her evidence. Witnesses are directed that only evidence connected with the subject matter of these proceedings is to be given and are asked to respect the parliamentary practice to the effect that, where possible, they should not criticise or make charges against any person, persons or entity by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable.

Members are reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect that they should not comment on, criticise or make charges against a person outside the House or an official either by name or in such a way as to make him or her identifiable.

I remind members to switch off their mobile phones or turn them to flight mode. That would be greatly appreciated.

I call Mr. Tomás Ó Ruairc, director of the Teaching Council of Ireland, to making his opening statement.

**Mr. Tomás Ó Ruairc:** Ba mhaith linn ár mbuíochas a ghabháil leis an gcoiste as an deis a thabhairt don gComhairle Múinteoireachta labhairt faoin ábhar tábhachtach seo. I thank the Acting Chairman and members for this opportunity to address them on the topic of childhood obesity. The Teaching Council is the statutory professional standards body for teaching in Ireland. We are responsible for promoting and regulating the profession of teaching under the Teaching Council Acts 2001 to 2015.

Research shows that obesity is a significant issue of concern for us in Ireland but we need to see it as one aspect of the overall health and well-being of children, young people and of us all. Education has a vital role to play in this process but it cannot do so in isolation from other areas of public health and public policy. It has taken time for the issue to reach these levels of concern and it will take time, along with co-ordinated and concerted effort, to reverse this trend in a long-lasting and sustainable way.

What do we know about the link between mental health and weight? Professor Jim Lucey described it as a situation where poor mental health is both a consequence of, and contributor to, the problem of excessive weight. In other words, they are closely interlinked. It would seem prudent, therefore, not to seek to address one in isolation from the other.

In terms of the responsibility of teachers from a Teaching Council point of view, section 4.4 of the code of the professional conduct for teachers, which was prepared and published by the council, states, “Teachers should: apply their knowledge and experience in facilitating pupils’/ students’ holistic development.” Facilitation implies that teachers have an important role and responsibility in supporting learners in their holistic development, but that cannot supplant the responsibility which others have in the lives of those young people, namely, families, parents, the wider community, medical and health professionals, and young people themselves. The council’s criteria and guidelines for programmes of initial teacher education state, “In all areas of study there should be provision for: - students’ personal and social development, having regard to teachers’ pastoral role.”

The establishment of the Wellbeing for Teachers and Learners Group is an important development in terms of the need to address the overall well-being needs of all members of the school community at the same time. Obesity is a challenge for the adult population every bit as much as it is for children and young people. The Wellbeing for Teachers and Learners Group was established by the Irish Primary Principals’ Network, IPPN, the National Association for Principals and Deputy Principals, NAPD, the Ombudsman for Children, the National Parents Council Primary and the Teaching Council.

In terms of the key message the Teaching Council wants to give to the committee, we are of the view that we need to tackle the problem of childhood obesity but this must be done as part of a holistic approach to the overall health and well-being of children, young people and adults. Education has a vital role to play in that endeavour.

Teachers, as the leaders of learning in education, have a key role to play in ensuring that education plays its part in supporting individual and community well-being, but that role cannot be fulfilled sustainably in isolation from all the other professionals who work in this area. Each of us has a responsibility in this area and each one of us can do a lot but we can do so much more when we work effectively together. We know that is true from the experience of the Wellbeing for Teachers and Learners Group, which has demonstrated what can be achieved when all members of the school community work together to support each other’s well-being. The key point, therefore, in the context of tackling childhood obesity is to understand in the first instance that it is but one aspect of the overall well-being of the school-going population. It is, in effect, a whole-of-person issue. Such an issue calls for a whole-of-system response. We need to join the dots.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Anne Rabbitte):** I thank Mr. Ó Ruairc and invite Mr. Browne to make his presentation.

**Mr. Geoffrey Browne:** The National Parents Council Post Primary, NPCpp, is grateful to the joint committee for the opportunity to make this opening statement on behalf of parents of students attending post-primary schools. We believe that to address this matter we must act on a societal basis and that Government agencies, educators, families and communities must work together to educate children, their parents and the society we live in. We must teach an understanding of the dangers of obesity and how we can move towards addressing these issues to effectively deal with this very real problem.

One statistic that springs to mind from Professor O'Shea's research, which relates to socioeconomic disadvantage, is that 12% of three year olds in socially deprived areas are obese, while 4% of three year olds in better off areas are obese. There is a massive disparity by the age of three. We know that consumption of sugar-sweetened drinks, SSDs, is associated with obesity and we believe that well designed taxes can be effective in discouraging consumption of these drinks.

Last year the childhood obesity surveillance initiative, COSI, was published. It was carried out by the HSE in conjunction with the national surveillance centre at UCD. The findings indicated that we still have a significant way to go in creating environments in homes, schools and communities where every child has the potential to grow and develop healthily from birth into adulthood. I will highlight three of the ten steps identified by the HSE. They are: the reformulation of food products to reduce sugar, fat and salt levels; reducing exposure to marketing and promotion of foods high in fat, salt and sugar along with fiscal measures such as the sugar tax and; increasing access to free drinking water in schools.

Looking to the future, we believe that, together with the necessary steps to curtail the consumption of problem foods and beverages we must educate society by working together towards a common goal. We suggest that schools and community venues can host informative parents' evenings to educate parents on how to reduce the use of sugar and problem foods in the home. That would help parents to make better choices in the home which would hopefully guide their children in turn to make better decisions when eating during the day. Tackling childhood obesity on a united front will, we feel, be most successful in guiding children and parents to make better choices.

Serious consideration should be given to a ban on vending machines that contain problem foods and snacks in schools and public places where children congregate. At the very least in these areas, problem snacks in vending machines should be replaced with healthier options. All schools should provide healthy options in their school canteen or tuck shop.

More physical activity after school and in free time should be encouraged and catered for. Adults in our communities should lead by example. We should avoid the car and walk to school in the mornings, where safe to do so, or head out for a family cycle in the evenings or at weekends. Facilities to pursue such outdoor exercise must be made available in all communities. We should strive to ensure that we assist educators to inform and encourage children and families to follow healthier lifestyles. We need to provide advice on healthier lunches and menus at school and home, education aids and sessions for children and parents about nutrition, facilities and infrastructure for exercise and encouragement towards physical activity as a social and family entertainment option.

What we do in homes, schools and communities to build healthy habits for all children and families is vital to our efforts to prevent childhood obesity. These are the critical habits that will help those children who are a healthy weight now to stay a healthy weight and those who are overweight or obese to achieve a healthier weight as they grow and develop.

Stigmatisation is something we must take into account. We must bear in mind that children are sensitive beings. It is important that guidance and advice on obesity and healthy living is understanding and caring. Those on which NPCpp are focussed are also young adults and we must be careful, therefore, not to just dictate. We must involve children and their parents in the process. Leading by example will be more useful than enforcement at this age. Care should be taken to ensure that any obesity prevention work that is carried out in schools and society does

not stigmatise overweight children or introduce children to thoughts of negative body image. The focus should be on the health of the children and not their weight.

Although the focus of the NPCpp is on post-primary students, we suggest that the root of the obesity problem may often begin in earlier years. We believe that the best solution can be achieved through a holistic plan being put in place to assist educators, families and communities to address this serious issue together. The NCPpp believe that existing green spaces, parks and playing fields must be preserved for leisure purposes and not closed or sold by agencies or Departments for non-leisure purposes. All schools must have physical education, PE, facilities and all classes must be timetabled for PE each week.

We suggest that the use of state healthcare and education resources in the battle against obesity would be advisable and productive. Prevention is better than cure. We should focus on the health of children from an early age with funds being invested in health education at preschool and primary schools as well as post-primary facilities. That would change lifestyle and health in Ireland for the better. The NPCpp is keen to play its part in the development of a plan and strategy towards a healthier society in which children can live and learn.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Anne Rabbitte):** I thank Mr. Browne very much for his presentation. I now call on Ms Maeve McCafferty, education and research official with the Irish National Teachers Organisation, INTO.

**Ms Maeve McCafferty:** The INTO thanks the Oireachtas for the opportunity to make an oral submission on tackling childhood obesity. Obesity is considered to have reached epidemic proportions in both adult and child populations in recent decades. According to figures provided by Growing Up in Ireland, 19% of children aged three years are overweight and 6% are obese indicating a strong need for early intervention well before children begin school when obesity levels reach one in every four. Furthermore, four out of five children in the Republic of Ireland do not meet the recommended Government physical activity guidelines of at least 60 minutes per day.

Primary teachers endeavour to create a healthy environment in schools and encourage children to make healthy lifestyle choices around diet and physical activity. PE and social personal and health education, SPHE, both form key parts of the primary curriculum by means of which teachers seek to educate pupils about healthy lifestyle choices and behaviours. A minimum of one hour of PE a week is recommended for all primary school pupils although many primary schools do not have the facilities and equipment to implement fully the PE programme as outlined in the curriculum. A commitment by the Government is required to ensure that all schools are provided with both indoor and outdoor PE facilities so that the programme can be implemented in full. Despite the under-resourcing, schools are committed to the promotion of healthy lifestyle choices for pupils through policies such as healthy lunches, although the success of such policies depends on parental co-operation. Schools also engage with a range of innovative whole-school initiatives with a view to encouraging a positive and healthy school culture. Some examples include walk on Wednesday, WOW; cycle on Wednesday, COW, active flag; active week; and walking bus to name but a few. The INTO cautions, however, that the escalating workload in schools makes ongoing engagement with the various initiatives challenging.

The few schools that are fortunate enough to have kitchen facilities also store and disseminate healthy snacks to pupils through initiatives such as Food Dudes. The INTO believes that it is regrettable that more schools do not have kitchen facilities particularly in disadvantaged

settings where pupils are provided with breakfast clubs and school meals.

There is no doubt that schools have a very important role to play in tackling obesity, but schools do not operate in isolation. Children are very much influenced by behaviours and practices that prevail in their home environment and the broader community. Schools are only one of several layers of the environment that affect children's behaviour. It is important that policy-makers break the cycle of focusing solely on schools to reduce the childhood obesity epidemic. Different approaches are needed that consider broader influences from the family, community, media and the food industry.

Furthermore, a study in the *British Medical Journal* suggests that relying solely on school-based programmes aimed at preventing obesity in children is unlikely to have much impact on the childhood obesity epidemic. The study provided children with a year of extra physical activity sessions as well as a healthy eating programme and cookery workshops involving their parents. It concluded that while school is an important setting for supporting healthy lifestyles, wider influences such as families, local communities and the food industry may have a greater effect. It is also important that further legislation be enacted to control and curb advertising of junk food. Tackling childhood obesity is a public health priority demanding a cross-sectoral approach. Continuing with isolated educational preventive approaches can never hope to greatly impact on the obesity epidemic.

It is important to highlight that primary schools can contribute to children's understanding of the importance of creating healthy environments and leading an active life. Schools alone, however, cannot solve or prevent the problem of obesity. A co-ordinated action, including a number of Departments, parents, schools, community-based organisations and healthcare providers, will be required in order to support families, address food poverty and to tackle the many factors contributing to Ireland's obesity problem.

**Mr. David Duffy:** The TUI would like to thank the committee for this opportunity to make a submission on the topic of tackling childhood obesity.

The health of young people is a critical matter for society as a whole as well as for the health and education sectors. In this regard, childhood obesity is a serious problem as children in Ireland are in the upper range of being overweight according to a study by NCD Risk Factor Collaboration. It is clear from the same study that the problem in Ireland is growing rapidly with a nine-fold to ten-fold increase in the number of children in Ireland classified as overweight since 1975.

Safefood Ireland estimates that one in four children in Ireland is either overweight or obese. The rate of obesity internationally in 17 year olds is approximately 20%. Frighteningly, a quarter of three year olds in Ireland are overweight or obese. Obesity is clearly linked to multiple other health difficulties and to changes over time in lifestyle. However, it is important to make a number of key points on the respective roles of the health and education sectors and of society as a whole.

There appears to be a significant correlation between childhood obesity and the increasingly sedentary, isolated and online recreational patterns of children. These patterns cannot be addressed or modified solely by or through the education system. All of Irish society has a responsibility to react to this public health problem. The Growing Up in Ireland study, for example, found that "online time was significantly higher among 17/18-year-olds who were overweight or obese." Safefood Ireland notes that the average amount of time spent by pre-

school children watching television each day is 2.2 hours and that the proportion of students walking to school has halved since 1981. The behaviours reflected in these findings have their origins in the home. Therefore, in the first instance, parents have an overarching responsibility to safeguard their children's health and well-being by way of intervening positively to modify these behaviours.

Schools, of course, also have a responsibility, for example, by delivering the appropriate PE programme to all students. That programme can serve a very useful role as part of society's response to the childhood obesity problem. Safefood Ireland recommends that children engage in 60 minutes of physical activity per day. Some, but not all, of this can take place in the school setting. Schools need to be able to access appropriate physical education facilities in order to support a structured PE programme. Regrettably, far too many schools do not have access to adequate PE facilities. Furthermore, many schools are concerned about a litigious culture in Irish society. Logical but regrettable responses to that litigious culture include schools being so concerned about accidents in the schoolyard that some have instigated limitations on students' physical activities, such as running in the schoolyard.

Fear also creates a societal climate that hinders physical activity for children. For example, children organising their own play appears to have become a rarity. Furthermore, many parents are concerned about allowing their children to play unsupervised in the street. Society must also examine the fact that obesity in some instances constitutes an eating disorder that is symptomatic of an underlying problem regarding greatly diminished self-esteem. It is therefore possibly a mental health issue as well as a physical health one.

A recent radio broadcast in Ireland suggested that a response to childhood obesity would be for schools to regularly weigh children and that teachers may be better placed than doctors to tell parents that their child is obese. The TUI finds that suggestion extraordinary and bizarre. Evidence shows that schools regularly weighing children can lead to further self-esteem issues for those children.

Issues such as eating disorders or self-esteem require schools to be able to call on the necessary support services. It is unfortunate that career guidance services, for example, have been reduced over the last decade. The recent partial restoration is welcome but full restoration of the service is required. Schools also need to be in a position to call upon other support services but, unfortunately, those services have also been under significant pressure recently, despite the best efforts of the staff involved. In the event of a student presenting with an eating disorder, the guidance counsellor will work with the student but also refer the matter to the relevant general practitioner. This work and referral would take considerable time out of the guidance allocation and the follow-up also takes considerable time.

There are legitimate concerns about the limited participation of students in senior cycle of post-primary in PE. On occasion, examination subjects have been prioritised and PE provision has been desultory. This limitation must be tackled as there is evidence that those who fall away from physical activity at this crucial time may develop patterns of inactivity that have lifelong and detrimental health consequences. School culture needs to be informed by a concern for health-promoting physical activity.

Schools have responsibilities in the area of health education and they carry out their responsibilities to the very best of their abilities, not just in specific curricular programmes like social, personal and health education, SPHE, and PE but also through a whole-school approach to healthy living. However, parents, guardians and families clearly have the primary responsibil-



ity in fostering values and practices relating to health. Indeed, Article 42 the Constitution cites the family unit as the “primary educator”.

The TUI again thanks the committee for this opportunity to make a submission and we would of course welcome any questions members may have. The problem of childhood obesity is of deep concern to the TUI and its members. Schools have an important role to play in the area but responsibilities also fall to parents, communities, the health system and a number of Departments. The great American educationalist Larry Cuban once said that when society gets an itch schools get scratched. Schools have responsibilities but so too does society. Schools are neither the cause of all societal problems nor the solution to all of society’s ills.

**Ms Moira Leydon:** It is a bit difficult to follow all those very comprehensive and insightful presentations. My approach will look at second level schools and what we regard as institutional issues that need to be addressed in the contribution of schools to tackling childhood obesity.

I hardly need add to the analysis that has already been presented to the committee that schools are just one part of a social project to address this issue. It is a privilege to be here. We have appeared before the Joint Committee on Education and Skills on many occasions in recent months. One of the messages that is coming through from the stakeholders in education involves the complexity of the issues facing young people. We are not so sure if schools are now the only institution in society that can manage it. The committee is getting that message today. I laughed when Mr. Duffy referred to the idea of schools weighing children. This originated in Great Britain. It shows the way complex social issues such as childhood obesity and public health issues can receive a very opportunistic political response which says that teachers should weigh kids and that this will suddenly address the issues. That type of response is not in the Irish tradition, thank God, but we should be very wary of it.

To return to the focus of my presentation, one analysis we need to do regarding childhood obesity is that it is a public health issue. We have voluminous evidence in the Irish context of the relationship between socioeconomic status and health status. We also have significant evidence from home, the EU and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, OECD, regarding the extent of relative poverty in Ireland and the way children are disproportionately affected, so we have this complex relationship between socioeconomic status, opportunities and child well-being, including physical health. This shows the complexity of the issue. However, the good news is that interventions do work and work particularly well for poorer children. It is always important to be realistic when we critique systems. Yes, interventions work and work best for poorer children but they also work best when they are introduced early and consistently.

From a second-level point of view, one of the very disturbing findings from the 2013 landmark the Economic and Social Research Institute, ESRI, research on physical activity among young people was that at primary level, students demonstrate pretty good patterns of recommended activity but this drops massively at second level. We really need to look a bit further at why this is happening. The ESRI research in 2013, and later in 2015 and 2017, found that 90% of schools are not providing the recommended two hours per week of physical education. The research asked the schools why this was the case. The reasons were that 64% of schools said they did not have space or facilities, which is a really significant issue which I will discuss in a moment, while 23% of schools said they did not provide the recommended two hours because of staffing issues - they did not have enough staff. The issue of supervision of students opting out of PE also arose regarding the question of who was going to supervise them. Finally, an issue arose with which we are all very familiar, namely, the academic nature of our curriculum. A total of 21% of schools said that curriculum choices meant that they did not give the time.

The 2015 Lifeskills survey found that only 32% of schools had healthy eating policies. A total of 27% of schools had vending machines. I am not saying this to criticise schools - that is not my job - I am saying it to give some of the facts. A total 27% of schools said they had vending machines. It is a huge income stream for schools. While we may have very good policies, etc., we also have the hard reality that schools need income streams.

The other point I would make is that the current framework for health promotion in schools dates from the 1990s and really needs to be reviewed at this stage. Since then, we have had the 2013 guidelines for second level mental health and the well-being programme in the junior cycle curriculum in 2015 so we now see huge fragmentation of policy. There needs to be a coherence in policy. We need to bring these policies together. One of the things we say in second-level education is that everybody wants the whole-school approach but without being cynical, quite frequently, the whole school approach ends up being everybody's business and nobody's responsibility. Who is actually going to drive this, evaluate it and make sure it happens? Of course, the Association of Secondary Teachers in Ireland, ASTI, will make the point that the impact of austerity on our schools has been corrosive with regard to leadership structures in schools. We found repeatedly in our research that what is happening in the absence of leadership structures is that everything is devolving to the classroom teacher so it is nobody's responsibility. Classroom teachers teach French or science. They do not necessarily have the skills or ambition to engage in these broader projects. It is a matter of achieving this balance between what I would call the policy and the implementation gap. We need to look at the institutional factors that are keeping that gap wide in our system.

I would make two recommendations to this committee that could be brought into the policy space. First, we have some fantastic new school buildings. We have amazing canteens and fantastic PE facilities - not just the gym and football pitches. The new PE syllabus for the leaving certificate, which can be examined as a leaving certificate subject, has a range of sports and activities such as track events, volleyball, all sorts of ball games with rackets and proper gym facilities rather than just a PE hall because many young people are into the gym and being fit. Our new schools are models in this regard but the sad fact is that most of our schools are pretty old institutions with poor infrastructure. I suggest that the Department of Education and Skills needs to conduct an audit of the actual state of facilities for PE, sports and games in schools, particularly older schools, so that we have evidence for policy. Again, I come back to this policy implementation gap and rhetoric. At the end of the day, rhetoric really cheeses people off. As legislators and scrutineers of the Estimates and the budget, members need to start looking at capital expenditure budget for schools and what is actually going into improving facilities that will lead to better capacity in schools with regard to physical activity, etc. There is a lot more to say but we need to hear from the members.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Anne Rabbitte):** Any submissions or opening statements made by the witnesses to the committee this morning will be published on the committee website after this meeting. We will now take questions.

**Deputy Denise Mitchell:** The witnesses have answered the questions I was going to ask. Could the other speakers who did not give an opinion give me their opinion about measuring and weighing children in school? I have my own opinion on that but I will keep it to myself for the time being. Mr. Browne spoke about expanding the idea of informative parents' evenings to educate parents on sugar intake and problem foods. Who would deliver this? Would there be a significant take-up in respect of it? Will I throw all my questions out together?

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Anne Rabbitte):** Yes.

**Deputy Denise Mitchell:** I read a report recently that argued that of children entering secondary school, boys were 32% fitter than girls. The figure rose to 41%. Do we need to look at the curriculum to encourage girls? Is there a problem with girls taking part in PE? Is it that the curriculum is not attractive to girls - possibly because it involves contact sport? Can any of the witnesses tell me about their experience regarding fast food outlets beside schools? Do they think this is a problem? What is their opinion of the “no-fry zone” campaign?

**Deputy Tom Neville:** I am interested in the witnesses’ views on weighing kids. From speaking to teachers anecdotally, there seems to be a flip side to PE. Obviously, I take on board the point that facilities might not be there but there seems to be a push back relating to some culture or subculture regarding the lack of interaction with PE on the part of students. Have any studies been done on the reason for that? What I am hearing is anecdotal evidence from friends of mine who are teachers and other people I meet in schools when I visit them. Is that coming from a culture of electronics, games and telephones or is it something more systematic? Is it a subculture or is it some sort of psychological effect? I am not saying that is a blanket situation but it seems that, more than ever, a certain cohort is pushing back against it and making excuses such as forgetting the gear and so on. Why is it making excuses? Is it to do with insecurity around body image, fashion or whatever? I do not know. I am just speaking anecdotally on that.

The third issue I want to raise concerns supervised or structured play, particularly in primary school. There is a certain age at which children are not allowed run around or whatever. I am probably being simplistic in terms of the role. I do not work in the area but I would like to get the witnesses’ thoughts on that because that could be extremely restrictive in terms of children’s development, risk taking, seeing what it is like to play with a ball and all those life skills one learns as a child. I do not have any qualification in that area. I started out as a teacher many years ago. I have not practised recently but that is anecdotal feedback I am getting and I would be very grateful for the witnesses’ comments on that.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Anne Rabbitte):** I will not ask a question yet but rather offer my own commentary on the issue. Ms Leydon spoke about the gathering of the information. I attended the BT Young Scientist & Technology Exhibition two years ago in which students from my local school, Portumna community school, participated. They had done that scope of research into the facilities that were available in both urban and rural areas and had the breakdown on that. We might bring them in before the committee to let us see that breakdown because they have done the heavy lifting, so to speak. They did that research in transition year, TY. They took a serious interest in it. They wanted more physical education and decided to find out the barriers that were holding back girls and boys from doing it. The point Ms Leydon made earlier is a valuable one. I invite her to answer the questions.

**Ms Moira Leydon:** I will be brief as there is a good deal of expertise on this side of the table. There is a good deal of research on the gender issue. That research is not new; it goes back 20 years or more. Unfortunately, gender is such a complex social issue that things do not change rapidly with it. The Deputy is quite right that one of the areas affecting this is body image. It comes back also to the physical spaces. Most schools do not have showering facilities. I refer to the fetish of body image now for our young people and girls. We have spoken in other committees about the sexualisation and commercialisation of adolescence and childhood, therefore, body image is critical. That is the reason the role of educators, who are very professional people in working with young people, is equally critical. We need research but, more to the point, we need to be able to facilitate teachers to address those issues. How do we do that?

We have good continuing professional development, CPD, and good school policies. It is like good architecture. When we have good architecture, good things happen. When we have good facilities such as changing rooms and mirrors to allow students put on the bit of make-up they are allowed to wear in school, it is much easier for girls to be enthusiastic.

In terms of teachers weighing students, I always say at international level that we are lucky in Ireland that our politicians do not take slick approaches to education policy. I refer to the idea in Britain that teachers would weigh a child. If I may be personal, I went to Weight Watchers once and it was a horrible experience because I had to stand up on a scales, someone weighed me and internally made a judgment about me. Can one imagine doing that to young people in front of their peers? At least the Weight Watchers person had some capacity to give me advice. What teacher will advise a young person on lifestyle? We all know that eating is not just about hunger. It is about many other issues. I would call that, and no insult to the former UK Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove, a “Govian” approach to education which we should resist with every effort here.

On the audit of physical education, PE, facilities, the new PE syllabus is exciting. Principals and teachers have come to me and said that they would love to have taken part in the pilot project but they did not have the range of physical facilities to ensure they could do the different strands. That is an area where legislators can make a significant impact because this is quite simple. If schools do not have them in their own situation they should at least be in a position to share those of other schools. That is the dimension of policy we have to examine. We need to start sharing expensive resources within our school sector. I will conclude to allow my colleagues a chance to contribute.

**Mr. David Duffy:** I thank the members for their insightful questions. I want to make two main points. On the idea of boys being fitter than girls or more interested in certain sports, a good deal of research indicates that boys, particularly teenage boys, are more interested in contact sports than girls. What is interesting in the survey that is happening now, as I am sure the members are aware, is that two new specifications for the leaving certificate were finalised recently. One is a non-examination framework for students who have been doing PE and the other is an examination subject of PE. What is particularly interesting in the context of Deputy Mitchell’s question is that both allow a good deal of flexibility about the type of sports and physical activities that are done as part of those specifications. It is possible then for schools to be able to tailor what they do to the interests of the students concerned within the context of the facilities that are available to the school. For example, if it was a single sex school, it could be tailored to the interests of the students concerned, within reason.

In terms of the flip side to PE, I agree with Deputy Neville that there are issues around the interaction. If I may digress briefly, Professor Emer Smyth tells a very good story of when she was doing some research into how students found the curriculum. She was interviewing some students who were studying home economics, which in the context of obesity is a serious and important matter. She asked a group of examination students what they were doing in home economics and they told her they were studying how to make mayonnaise but they asked why they needed to know how to make mayonnaise because it is not-----

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Anne Rabbitte):** I am sorry to interrupt Mr. Duffy. Deputy Neville, I think you are needed in the Dáil Chamber.

**Deputy Tom Neville:** A quorum has been called in the Dáil. I apologise that I have to leave. I want to hear what Mr. Duffy is saying but I am being summoned. I will be back in

about five minutes.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Anne Rabbitte):** That is okay.

**Mr. David Duffy:** The students asked her why they needed to know how to make mayonnaise when it will not be a question in the examination. There is an element of our students, particularly in examination years and perhaps understandably, focusing very much on what is on the examination paper. That is the reason PE sometimes ends up suffering, so to speak.

What is interesting in that context is that the revised junior cycle, and particularly the well-being aspect of that cycle, may go a considerable way towards dealing with some of those issues. One factor within the revised junior cycle that will be particularly helpful is the 300 to 400 hours of well-being of which 200 hours are for PE. It was always the intention that schools would provide 200 hours of PE but it has always been very difficult for schools to do that. The well-being programme is at least giving schools the opportunity to be able to do that but I have to throw in the proviso that that is assuming the facilities are available to the school in the first place.

**Ms Maeve McCafferty:** I thank Deputy Mitchell for her questions. To come back to the point about weighing children in primary school, we are already hearing increasing evidence from our teachers about anxiety in very young children and the impact of self-esteem issues and mental health in general, including test anxiety. That is almost a physical test for children so we would have grave concerns about that. We also believe it would be outside the professional remit of the role of the teacher. It is becoming a case of offloading the work of other professionals on to teachers, which is happening more frequently. We have a good deal of concern about the damage that practice might have on the unique relationship between a teacher and their pupils.

Mention was made of girls resisting the high-impact sports in PE. We are lucky in Ireland that we have a broad and holistic curriculum. That includes the physical education, PE, curriculum where there is much variety such as aquatics, athletics and dance movement - it is not just games. In saying that, the NCCA is reviewing the primary school curriculum. Our current curriculum was developed in 1999, making it one of the oldest curriculums in Ireland. The INTO welcomes a review of the PE curriculum and looking at more ways for it to appeal to girls.

Pupils absenting themselves from PE and from sport was also mentioned. That is a challenge and I imagine even more so in post primary. The INTO respects that parents have the right to withdraw their child from any aspect of the curriculum. It is not something we encourage as teachers for many reasons. It creates significant logistical challenges for schools at a local level when parents withdraw their children. Who will supervise that child when he or she does not partake in PE?

On facilities and infrastructure, and limitations on recreational grounds in school, we see that happening more and more and particularly in city schools. Recreational spaces are becoming ever more limited. It is not a widespread practice but we have heard anecdotal evidence of no running policies in school yards. We are operating, unfortunately, in a culture of litigation and boards of management are very exposed as a consequence. Nobody agrees with it. The Department of Education and Skills may need to look at something like a minimal recreational space with every school. This comes back to property prices as well. Schools are selling their recreational spaces for funding, which is regrettable.

**Mr. Geoffrey Browne:** I will address a couple of points. Ultimately, the National Parents

Council is not looking to move its responsibility on to other agencies but we advocate that there has to be a combined effort here from all the stakeholders. It has been mentioned that fewer children are walking and cycling to school and it is for obvious reasons. I come from the countryside in Donegal and there are no cycle routes and there is much more traffic on the roads. It is not safe in many instances for children to walk or cycle to school.

On play at school, I almost lament back to my days in school. We got to play in school at break times and lunchtimes - we could climb trees and fall on one's hunkers. I understand because of the risk of litigation now why schools limit that type of activity. All we are doing, however, is creating an environment for our children where the visibility of and access to activities of a physical nature is being continually eroded. I will not start on the impact that gaming and electronic devices have had on our young people.

I come to the question from Deputy Mitchell in respect of the weighing of children. We have not surveyed parents on this but before I give my answer I will refer back to a recent article in the *Irish Independent*. It was in my report but I did not read it out. The article was on how the Dutch are tackling childhood obesity. It refers to how one of the ways it is being approached is by having children screened by local government once a year. Their weight and height are measured confidentially. Bar the statistics, I do not really see any added benefit. It is almost akin to when a person goes to the doctor and he and or she is told that a few pounds could be lost. People realise that before they go to the doctor in the first place. It is the same perhaps with our children. We definitely would not advocate schools weighing children; perhaps health centres might, with professionals there who can issue good advice on healthy living habits to children and parents.

There was also a question on whether parents would attend informative education seminars on healthy living and eating. I believe they would but with the caveats that the training would need to be delivered by qualified dieticians and people in that area and also that the timing of training would not be between 9 a.m. and 5 p.m., when most parents are either working or tied up in other activities. All too often we see these types of events geared towards - dare I say it - the people providing the information. It suits their timeframes rather than the intended audience.

I refer to fast food outlets. In Professor O'Shea's report, interestingly, he also noted that in areas of socio-economic disadvantage the ratio of healthy food outlets and supermarkets to fast food outlets is skewed towards the latter. We need to be mindful of the change in lifestyles and simple economics. It is often cheaper and more convenient to run to the local chipper. Parents are dropping kids off at 6 a.m. and 7 a.m., particularly in the cities, and maybe not getting home until 8 p.m. We can tackle that through education and maybe through work environments providing a better work-life balance for parents. We are not moving off our responsibilities as parents but society as a whole has to provide a mechanism where we can all work together. Ultimately, it suits society, government and everybody for us to have a healthier population. We would save on healthcare costs in future.

**Mr. Tomás Ó Ruairc:** My colleagues have given an excellent analysis of the situation in respect of the curricular space and the curricular uptick. I want to focus on Deputy Mitchell's question on the weighing of children. Counterintuitively, if not counterproductively, it goes to the heart of the matter. We are responsible for a register of 100,000 teachers across primary, post primary and further education. We have a governing board and a Teaching Council which represents nearly all stakeholders in education. I am pointing those facts out because by default we take a whole-of-system response across education.

We would recoil at a human level from the suggestion that children be weighed in schools. There is a sense that it is a no-no. From a more objective policy response, it would miss the wood for one tree - it would miss the overall issue. Ms McCafferty referred to the risk of other professionals being seen to offload their work onto teachers. If anything, teachers want to connect better with other professionals. They do not want to take on their work and the other professions do not want to offload it either. They want to understand better the perspectives that the other professionals bring to bear in the interests of children and young people. Teachers care - they care deeply about the children and people in their care. They understand also that they have a professional remit in this space that needs to be very carefully watched.

As we said in our opening submission, it is a whole-of-person issue that requires a whole-of-system response. Ms Leydon mentioned in the opening statement the importance of policy consistency given the source of the suggestion in the first place was in England, where there is not a teaching council. Policy consistency has been an interesting issue, to put it mildly. One of the reasons a Teaching Council was established in Ireland was to try to support greater policy consistency so that there is less back and forth and people know where they stand - teachers and students alike. We would be against that suggestion for the reasons I have outlined.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Anne Rabbitte):** Deputy Neville wants to come in again.

**Deputy Tom Neville:** I have a quick question. I am going to brainstorm a bit, if the committee will indulge me. I am going back to 2008 or 2009, if I remember correctly, and the advent of Wii technology. Can people remember Wii technology and computer games? I do not know if anyone does but someone may. The smartphone is taking everything over and it is leading to people not interacting, engaging or becoming physically active. Wii technology, however, came out in 2008 or 2009 and this was the silver bullet to address anybody who may not have been into sport - he or she could interact with computers physically. It was done for a number of years but it seems to have dropped off the radar, perhaps because the advent of the smartphone has made it redundant. Have there been any studies around using this technology given that children and young people are so interactive in using it? I heard on the radio two or three days ago about how some people are talking about making the sport of playing computer games an Olympic sport. There is a vast industry around it. People come to watch others play sporting computer games on the television. This subculture is emerging throughout the globe.

Have there been any studies around bringing back or using Wii technology? Instead of taking the view that all electronics are bad, we could ask how to take and use the language and manipulate it to get what we want. One thing struck me about Wii technology when we worked with it in university. We used it for music. It was possible to make music with Wii technology through using the movement of our hands. The same thing could apply to children at school, especially those who may not be interested in, or may not think they are interested in, combat sports. It may be a way of generating interest. Have any studies been done in this area? It is simply a brainstorm question.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Anne Rabbitte):** I actually know all about the Wii as well.

**Deputy Tom Neville:** It is old now.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Anne Rabbitte):** It is. Mr. Browne, do you want to comment?

**Mr. Geoffrey Browne:** I can go back further than that to Pac-Man and Asteroids and such games. They were more sedentary. I have no information on any particular studies. My

background is in computer science. Perhaps we are partially to blame for introducing all this technology.

From my knowledge of technology there is no reason what we refer to as the old Wii technology could not be deployed nowadays. Given the advance of artificial intelligence and correct use of heuristics and so on, I foresee no technical limitation. I have observed my children at home. They range from eight to 18 years of age - I have three in between those brackets. They sit and talk to their friends using the technology but they are not active while using it. The only parts getting exercise are their thumbs and perhaps their index fingers. Ironically, all the technology includes apps to measure how many steps a person walks in a day, yet they are almost part of the cause of our difficulties and lack of physical exercise.

I am not aware of the studies Deputy Neville asked about. September will see the introduction of computer science as a senior cycle elective subject. Part of the curriculum includes artificial intelligence and the impact technology has on society as a whole. There is more money to be made by technology companies in having us sitting rather than exercising. However, I can certainly say that technically there should be no limitation on the idea.

**Ms Moira Leydon:** I wish to directly address the line of questioning from Deputy Neville. It would be useful for the committee to look at the work of the Physical Education Association of Ireland. The website is *www.peai.ie*. The association is a fantastic professional teacher body and it has done amazing work. It has a vast evidence base on good practices, etc. The most recent conference did a great deal of work on the technology dimension. It would possibly be useful for committee members to invite the association before the committee.

I am taking a materialist approach to this. While technology may enhance the enjoyment of physical education in schools, research demonstrates that schools are not providing the two hours required per week. That is primarily because of space and facilities and secondly because of staffing. These are capital investment issues since schools do not have the space or teachers to do this work. A school might have one physical education hall for 900 pupils. How can a school manage that? It simply does not happen.

I agree that we should be positive about technology in terms of how it can enhance the learning experience. It can also make teaching more creative and exciting and more in tune with the culture of young people. However, unless we provide the infrastructure and the institutional environment, we are only going to waste money.

**Ms Maeve McCafferty:** Deputy Neville is right to say technology does not have to be the enemy. It can be used to enhance physical activity. However, it will take some creative and innovative thinking. We need to move in that direction. If there is a curriculum review in primary schools, we will have to see how we bring that in. I will offer an anecdote from my classroom days. We used YouTube for yoga in the classroom. There was no way I could compete with the animated movement of the children. They were so enthused and engaged and the technology allowed us to do it in the classroom.

I wish to bring one statistic to the attention of the committee. Many schools do not have PE halls, especially primary schools. This is evident where I come from in Donegal. An INTO study found that 80% of schools, especially in rural Ireland, do not have PE halls. We need to be realistic about it and we need to get creative in how we get physical activity into the classroom.



**Deputy Denise Mitchell:** I will ask some questions on primary school and then perhaps the deputations can address a question on secondary schools. I am a parent who has three children in primary school and I am keen to say that fantastic work is being done. We have the Food Dudes and Super Troopers programmes and Walk to School Week. The children and I have participated in these regularly. Great things are going on but we need more to be done. What is the percentage of primary schools failing to deliver one hour of PE due to facilities? What is the percentage of primary schools with adequate kitchen facilities?

**Ms Maeve McCafferty:** We have some statistics but they are not current at this stage and therefore we would certainly welcome what Ms Leydon has suggested. There is a definite need for an audit to be carried out. It is not only a question of whether schools have the facilities but whether they are of a sufficient standard. It comes back to schools having rules about no running in the yard because the surface of the yard is in such an unfit state that it could be a hazard for children tripping, etc. It all comes back to funding. There is certainly a need for an up-to-date audit on school facilities. It comes down to the inability to operate during inclement weather in Ireland. It is simply not feasible to get out into the yard every week if there is no PE hall. That is one of the big barriers.

**Deputy Denise Mitchell:** What experience do schools have when they try to access grants for such facilities? What do schools find when they go to the Department?

**Ms Maeve McCafferty:** When schools do not have the facilities they try to create a culture that permeates the whole school day. This includes promoting walking to school, the Food Dudes initiative and so on. I was involved in the Food Dudes initiative and it is excellent. However, schools do not have refrigeration. There are hygiene issues around storing food, giving it to children and so on. It is a matter of building the infrastructure to support the initiatives.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Anne Rabbitte):** Thank you for all the presentations. One term that stuck out during Ms Leydon's presentation was "income stream". I did not like to hear it but it is the reality. Another word that stood out for me was "sedentary". This runs on from Deputy Neville's question and I will direct it toward Mr. Duffy. How can parents and educators work together to minimise sedentary behaviour in young people?

I have a question for Ms Leydon on a matter mentioned in her presentation. Can she explain what a leadership post would involve and what responsibilities the post would have? How should we frame a policy document that would require an equally robust implementation framework? Do the deputations understand my question? There is little value in having a great policy or framework if it is not implemented properly. We have to look at the structures that we will be putting in place. If we do not weigh and measure and operate with flexibility around children, how will we ever get a real approach to this? This needs to be done through early intervention. It should be happening in preschools. We were talking about it happening in our health centres. The reason some commentators use the whole idea of weighing and measuring flexibility when taking measurements is that there would then be a proper framework for addressing the problem. Where do the witnesses think such interventions would be best positioned? Would they welcome professionals coming into schools to do this or would it be better carried out in public health centres? It has to be addressed somewhere along the line because we have an epidemic and we need to gather the data and research. I am not advocating for this to be done in schools but asking about the elephant in the room. When I refer to measuring I am talking about children's flexibility, which affects their ability to participate in sport. Sometimes children feel that they are not able to run properly, which holds them back from doing a particular form of sporting activity. While they may feel they are no good at anything, they may have

a condition. They might be growing so quickly that their tendons have not caught up, which holds them back in respect of running. I refer to that sort of idea.

Where do the witnesses think such an initiative would be best positioned? Perhaps that is a question for Mr. Browne. It is hard for teachers or those advocating in this area to answer. I would love to see where it could sit because we will need to start gathering the data. We cannot just gather data on the basis of one school here and one school there or one location here and another location there. We have to have a broad sweep in order to gather the data. If Professor O'Shea and his team are to do their job and do it well, they have to start gathering data and getting results. We must have benchmarks to identify whether we are making improvements. Where do we start gathering the data?

**Mr. David Duffy:** On the Acting Chair's question about parents and educators working together, there are some very interesting and useful ways in which that can happen. In regard to the whole issue of healthy lifestyles, which might include physical education, PE, healthy eating and general activity and anything from walking to school to what one eats, there are some useful areas to consider, particularly in the context of a whole-school approach. It is about the board of management devising policies that are practical for both parties and the wider school community also getting involved. I already mentioned the implementation of well-being. That is not only part of the curriculum but its implementation is also a matter for the board of management of the school. The board can give support on that issue.

It has not been possible for many schools to provide the 200 hours for PE they ideally should provide, not only for reasons relating to facilities but also because of a lack of teachers and timetabling issues in some cases. The well-being measure takes that to another level. It is about the board of management working together with all the stakeholders involved, including the local community, county councils, teachers, parents and, in the case of many of our schools, the education and training boards, ETBs, to ensure 200 hours of physical education and a qualified PE teacher are available. In many schools, particularly the larger ones, two or three qualified PE teachers may be required. In many such schools only one PE teacher has been available thus far.

As I am sure the committee is aware, the demographics of post-primary education over the next few years will be very interesting. Between now and 2025, when we will hit the peak, we are looking at somewhere in the region of 50,000 to 60,000 extra students. It depends on which demographic model one looks at. Approximately 50,000 to 60,000 extra students will come into the post-primary system in the next few years. That gives us an opportunity in terms of teacher recruitment but, as I am sure the committee is aware, there are serious issues around teacher supply. Much of that relates to pay for new entrants, which has been an issue since 2011. The board of management and the whole school can work together on that issue.

The board and all the stakeholders involved - parents, educators and so on - can work together to lobby for extra facilities, whether in the school, the local community or, ideally, both. They can also work together to promote healthy lifestyles generally, which includes healthy lifestyles in the school. As my colleague from the National Parents Council Post Primary stated, there is an issue with vending machines and, more precisely, what is being sold in them. It is also about ensuring physical education is available and students can take up valuable programmes such as home economics to learn about healthy eating. It is about schools being able to provide the PE programme at leaving certificate, whether under the non-examination framework or as an examination subject, and promoting sport to students.

It is also about the role of extra-curricular activities in schools. In many cases, extra-curricular activities are supported not only by teachers but also by parents who often do a great deal of valuable work in supporting teams. It is about making sure that students and children feel supported when taking part in extra-curricular activities and that schools, through both the educators running the teams and the parents who often provide valuable support, are provided with the opportunities to engage in extra-curricular activities. It is not only about the teams. It is also about the students who enjoy playing sports but may not be very good at them. In my own case, I loved playing sports but I was dreadful at all of them. My parents consistently gave me the message that playing sport was important and that if I enjoyed sport, I should do it regardless of whether I was captain of the team, because there was no chance of me making the team, never mind being captain of it.

**Mr. Geoffrey Browne:** I will make a point on the earlier discussion about vending machines. Some of my colleagues stated these machines are an income stream in schools. I would extend that to beyond schools. Ironically, we also see them in swimming pools, gymnasiums and so on. I often think they are the most popular machine in some gyms. They are an income stream even outside schools. They certainly should not be in public pools. The first thing someone buys after swimming should not be a fizzy drink and bar of chocolate. We could look at those but I fully understand that they are income streams.

On schools and parents working together, this is already the case. Most schools, both at primary and post-primary level, have parents' associations *in situ*. On providing training about healthy eating and so on, the National Parents Council Post Primary would be delighted to act as a funnel or to organise such training for parents' associations across the country, many of which we represent. I should include the caveat that this would be subject to resources being made available by the relevant Departments.

To return to the thorny issue of weighing children, which was raised by the Acting Chairman, in this day and age children are intelligent, as are some adults, although maybe not myself. I do not see why we could not weigh children at home and feed that information into a secure online extranet. It is not exactly rocket science to weigh oneself and see what height one is. That would remove a certain amount of the stigma. Obviously, consultations would be required in cases where professional advice is needed, but if the purpose was purely to see the state of the nation, we could throw together a website which people could log in to and enter their vital statistics. Thinking outside of the box and holistically, there are ways of doing that. However, I would again advise caution in respect of schools carrying out this function. As I noted in my opening statement, we need to be mindful of stigmatising children. We need to advocate that this is about their well-being and health. From what I can remember of the relationships and sexuality education class - although I do not remember what it was called back then - I was cracking up down the back afterwards and asking what the boys thought of it. Children talk at school and we need to be mindful of that.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Anne Rabbitte):** Absolutely.

**Mr. Tomás Ó Ruairc:** The Acting Chair raised an important point. The goal of any activities, actions or policies emerging from the deliberations of the committee, or of policy more broadly, in respect of data is to get sufficiently reliable data to ensure that policies are informed by evidence and will have the impact they are designed to have. It is clear from the presentations this morning that we certainly have sufficient data to know that we have a problem in Ireland. Ms Leydon referred to the voluminous research on social and physical health. We have sufficient data to also know there is a possible risk of overstating the extent of the problem.

The statistics I have received from Professor Donal O'Shea indicate 12% of group five socio-economic children are obese. I know 12% is 12% too many but 88% are not obese. There is certainly a risk of over-focusing on physical weight as the issue to the exclusion of all others. As Professor Jim Lucey stated in his research, mental health is both a contributor to and a consequence of excessive weight. There is almost a vicious circle aspect to it.

Before we start gathering additional data, we need to be quite clear as a society as to what we are trying to achieve. Schools have plenty of experience of professionals coming in from the outside, such as psychologists, speech therapists and dentists. This will be nothing new to them as such. In its document on promoting a healthy school, the HSE highlighted two key facets of successful intervention in this space, namely, collaboration and integration. Teachers want to collaborate with other professionals. Rather than crossing professional boundaries inappropriately, they need to ascertain what are their responsibilities and what are the needs and then to focus on that. That has to be the key element. We can get the data but we need to look at the data we have already and build on that in collaboration with each other.

**Ms Moira Leydon:** When one has a whole-school approach to any phenomenon, whether it is to guidance which is a statutory function, or to health promotion, one needs teams, collaboration and integration. One needs someone to lead that team. One needs a person to say this is where our school is at in terms of health promotion and that we have five key areas to sustain, promote and get students engaged in. That does not happen unless one has a team. Leadership in this dimension is about having enough leadership positions in our schools where one can lead the programme.

Having adequate leadership leads to a sense of ownership. I coined the phrase earlier, "everybody's business, nobody's responsibility". That is serious because if no one feels responsible, it does not happen. Leadership teams, however, are responsible and accountable.

The other area is benchmarking and the Acting Chairman was absolutely right to use those words. We have policy but we need to know what is happening. It might sound heretical for a teachers' union to say we possibly need another evaluation model. We do not have any evaluation model which looks at the way the health promoting school programme is implemented. We have many evaluations for subjects, programmes and a new model for child safeguarding. Given the Acting Chairman's statement about an epidemic and critical social challenges, do we now need to look at a framework for evaluating how schools are managing with the health promoting schools programme? It is important to add that that evaluation in schools is aimed at school improvement. It is not aimed at blaming them. That is how one benchmarks. For example, how is pastoral care done? Is there a canteen in the school? Many kids do not eat breakfast for social reasons. The chipper is a far nicer prospect than a mundane sandwich in a school canteen.

Leadership is about taking ownership. We need to know what is happening. Accordingly, we need to look at evaluation and good benchmarks. The Minister for Education and Skills has introduced an excellence fund in the Action Plan for Education, the purpose of which is getting activities going around key educational objectives. I suggest the committee look at that as a good way of piloting this.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Anne Rabbitte):** On behalf of the joint committee, I thank the witnesses for their presentations today and dealing with members' questions in a comprehensive manner.

16 MAY 2018

The joint committee went into private session at 11.15 a.m. and adjourned at 11.19 a.m. until 9.30 a.m. on Wednesday, 30 May 2018.