

# DÁIL ÉIREANN

---

## AN COMHCHOISTE UM OIDEACHAS AGUS SCILEANNA

## JOINT COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND SKILLS

---

*Dé Máirt, 1 Bealtaine 2018*

*Tuesday, 1 May 2018*

---

Tháinig an Comhchoiste le chéile ag 3.30 p.m.

---

The Joint Committee met at 3.30 p.m.

Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair / Members present:

Teachtaí Dála / Deputies	Seanadóirí / Senators
Thomas Byrne,	Robbie Gallagher,
Kathleen Funchion,	Pádraig Mac Lochlainn,*
Catherine Martin,	Grace O'Sullivan.*
Tony McLoughlin,	
Hildegarde Naughton.	

\* In éagmais / In the absence of Senators Paul Gavan and Lynn Ruane.

I láthair / In attendance: Deputy Paul Murphy.

Teachta / Deputy Fiona O'Loughlin sa Chathaoir / in the Chair.

## **Business of Joint Committee**

**Chairman:** Apologies have been received from Deputy Jan O’Sullivan and Senators Maria Byrne, Paul Gavan and Lynn Ruane.

I formally welcome Deputy Hildegarde Naughton to the joint committee. She replaces the recently appointed Minister, Deputy Josepha Madigan, whom I thank for her contribution to the work of the committee. She was only here for a short time when she was called to greater things. There has been a pattern at this committee. The Minister of State, Deputy Jim Daly, was also a member before being called to greater things. That might herald good things for Deputy Hildegarde Naughton in the future.

We will go into private session to deal with some housekeeping matters.

*The joint committee went into private session at 3.45 p.m. and resumed in public session at 4 p.m.*

## **Relationships and Sexuality Education: Discussion**

**Chairman:** I remind members and witnesses to turn off their mobile phones or to switch them to flight mode because mobile phones interfere with the sound system and make it difficult for the parliamentary reporters to cover the meeting and television coverage and web streaming will also be adversely affected.

The next item is engagement with stakeholders on the committee’s review of relationships and sexuality education, RSE. The purpose of this initial meeting is to engage with officials from the Department of Education and Skills and the National Council of Curriculum and Assessment on the committee’s review of relationships and sexuality education. This will enable us to get a clearer understanding of the situation in respect of RSE and for us to be briefed on the content of the curriculum and how it is delivered in schools. We will be dividing these into two parts.

On behalf of the committee, I welcome Dr. Suzanne Dillon, assistant chief inspector, and Ms Rita Sexton, assistant principal officer, Department of Education and Skills; and Mr. John Hammond, chief executive officer, and Ms Ger Halbert, education officer, National Council of Curriculum and Assessment, NCCA. The format of this part of the meeting is that I will invite the witnesses to make a brief opening statement. I have to limit witnesses to a maximum of three minutes because situations have arisen since we organised the meeting and members need to be back in the Chamber at as close to 6 o’clock as possible. I am sure the witnesses will understand that. Members have agreed to limit their speaking time as well. We will follow the opening statements with engagement with the members of the committee.

Before we begin, I wish to draw the attention of witnesses to the fact that by virtue of section 17(2)(l) of the Defamation Act 2009, they are protected by absolute privilege in respect of the evidence they give to this committee. However, if they are directed by the Chairman to cease giving evidence on a particular matter and they continue to so do, they are entitled thereafter only to a qualified privilege in respect of their evidence. They are directed that only evidence connected with the subject matter of these proceedings is to be given and they 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. I also wish to advise witnesses that opening statements made to the committee will be published on the committee website after this meeting.

Before I call on Dr. Dillon to speak, I wish to inform the committee that I have to absent myself in a few minutes. Deputy Thomas Byrne has kindly agreed to take the Chair and the committee has agreed to that. I need to be present in the House for oral questions. I call on Dr. Suzanne Dillon to make her opening statement on behalf of the Department of Education and Skills.

**Ms Rita Sexton:** I will make the opening statement on behalf of the Department.

**Chairman:** That is fine.

**Ms Rita Sexton:** I thank the committee for the opportunity to make this opening statement. It has requested to be briefed on the content of the relationships and sexuality education, RSE, curriculum and how it is currently delivered in schools. The Department of Education and Skills has made a detailed written submission to the committee which sets out the current curricular provision for RSE at primary and post-primary level. I propose, therefore, to outline briefly the current curricular provision. I, along with my colleagues, will be happy to engage with the committee during the subsequent question and answer session.

The committee will be aware that the Minister has commissioned a review of the RSE curriculum at primary and post-primary level. This review will be conducted by the NCCA. Social, personal and health education, SPHE, is a mandatory curriculum subject in all primary schools and in post-primary junior cycle. RSE is required at all levels, from primary through to senior cycle. The Department has set out the content for each of these programmes in SPHE syllabuses and guidelines.

RSE is not taught as a distinct programme or subject in primary schools and in junior cycle, but forms an integral part of the SPHE curriculum at both levels. At senior cycle, the school's RSE programme may be taught as a distinct programme or may be delivered in the context of an SPHE programme or another subject.

All schools are required to have an RSE policy that is developed in consultation with the school community, including school management, parents, teachers and students. The school's programme for RSE is developed and taught in the context of the school's RSE policy. It is important to note that the ethos of the school should never preclude learners from acquiring the knowledge about the issues, but ethos may influence how that content is treated.

The primary level SPHE curriculum, which is currently used in schools, was published in 1999. Its purpose is to foster the personal development, health and well-being of the individual child to help him or her to create and maintain supportive relationships and to enable children to make safe and healthy decisions now and in the future. Primary schools are also required to fully implement the Stay Safe programme, which addresses physical, emotional and sexual abuse. It aims to increase resilience, by giving children knowledge, skills and strategies in an age-appropriate manner, which is an important precursor to understanding the concept of consent in an adult sexual relationship.

At post-primary level, the SPHE curriculum framework for junior cycle was published in 2000. It provides students with the opportunity to develop the skills and competence to take care of themselves and others and to make informed decisions about their health, personal lives

and social development. This curriculum framework has been supplemented by an extensive range of additional teaching materials since 2000. These include resources to support teaching in the area of RSE. This work has been done in partnership with other Government Departments and agencies, including the HSE; the Gay and Lesbian Equality Network, GLEN; and the crisis pregnancy programme. While schools have discretion regarding the resources that they use to teach SPHE and RSE, it should be noted that in the Lifeskills Survey which was published in 2015, 66% of post-primary schools reported using the B4 U Decide resource, and 71% of schools stated that they use the Talking Relationships, Understanding Sexuality Teaching Resource, TRUST, which are the resources developed by the HSE. The NCCA has also developed a senior cycle SPHE framework for use by schools. Post-primary schools are required to teach all aspects of the RSE programme, including family planning, sexually transmitted infections and sexual orientation.

The Department has issued guidelines to schools on the engagement of outside facilitators. When engaging external facilitators schools are advised that the facilitators must work under the guidance and supervision of the relevant teacher, who should remain in the classroom with the learners at all times and retain a central role in the delivery of the subject matter. External agencies should use evidence-based methodologies with clear educational outcomes.

**Chairman:** I thank Ms Sexton. I now call Mr. Hammond.

**Mr. John Hammond:** I thank the committee for inviting the NCCA to meet with it today to consider the area of relationships and sexuality education, RSE, in the curriculum. Our colleagues from the Department of Education and Skills have addressed the content and provision for RSE in the curriculum and in schools. My colleague, Ms Ger Halbert, education officer for social, personal and health education, SPHE, and I will confine our opening statement to outlining the terms of the review that the Minister for Education and Skills has requested the NCCA to undertake in the area of RSE.

On 3 April 2018, the Minister for Education and Skills, Deputy Richard Bruton, wrote to the chairperson requesting that the NCCA undertake a major review of RSE in schools. On 3 April last, the Minister wrote to the chairperson requesting that the NCCA undertake “a major review” of RSE in schools. The letter noted that the review should encompass the curriculum for RSE, the support materials for this area of the curriculum and also the delivery of the curriculum to students. This latter dimension of the review reflects commentary over the years since its introduction that many of the issues related to the experience of RSE in schools have to do with its implementation as much as its specification or provision.

There have been significant developments in the curriculum for RSE in recent years, as part of broader developments related to social, personal and health education, SPHE. RSE is included as part of SPHE in the primary school curriculum. A new short course for SPHE, including substantial learning outcomes in the area of RSE, was developed and introduced in 2015 as part of the junior cycle developments and the new curriculum area of well-being. In 2011, a new curriculum framework for senior cycle SPHE was published. It is built around five areas of learning, one of which is RSE. Notwithstanding these developments, the Minister expressed the view that there is a need to “undertake a comprehensive review across all stages of education to ensure that it is fit for purpose and meets the needs of young people today in modern Ireland”.

Specifically, the NCCA’s review will encompass the following aspects of RSE: consent, what it means and its importance; developments in contraception; healthy, positive sexual ex-

pression and relationships; safe use of the Internet; social media and their effects on relationships and self-esteem; and LGBTQ+ matters.

The review will also consider the experience and reality of RSE as delivered in schools, providing an opportunity for teachers, students, principals and parents to be consulted about RSE in particular contexts, such as how the RSE curriculum is planned, how it is taught and how parents are involved; whether the curriculum is being taught in schools to a high standard; the role of the classroom teacher in teaching the curriculum and the appropriate level of supports that are currently being provided by external providers; the time given to RSE, what resources are being provided, and what support materials are being used; and the effectiveness of the continuing professional development opportunities provided by the Department and other bodies to RSE teachers. Ultimately, it is envisaged that the review of RSE will inform wider reviews currently taking place in the NCCA, notably primary curriculum review and redevelopment and senior cycle review.

Clearly, a major review of this kind, which is multidimensional in nature, will require careful consideration and planning, but the NCCA will respond to the Department at the earliest possible date with an assessment of how the review work will be undertaken, together with a timeline for its completion. In this context, the Minister's request and the review of RSE will be discussed at the next meeting of the NCCA, which takes place in two days, on Thursday, 3 May.

In general terms, given the scope of the request, the review is likely to comprise at least three interrelated elements. The first would involve examining recently published research and studies, national and international, in the area of relationships and sexuality education. Given the range of initiatives and programmes in the area of RSE down the years, the second element would involve meeting key leaders, organisations and initiatives in Ireland, including Government agencies, non-governmental organisations, stakeholder bodies, support services and the inspectorate of the Department of Education and Skills. In our view, these individuals and organisations have much to contribute to the experience and evidence base needed to inform the review.

The third element involves working directly with schools. This will provide an opportunity to discuss the reality of the experience of RSE in schools and classrooms – what works and what does not work, and why – and will involve talking to the students, parents, management and teachers in a number of schools. The outcomes from these three elements of the review, and any other elements that are viewed as important when discussed by council, in a couple of days, will point to the recommendations on next steps in the areas of curriculum development, provision and implementation.

The review of RSE will be an extensive, complex, multidimensional piece of work. We recognise its contested and controversial nature, and its topical relevance. From our point of view, the request to undertake the review is a very welcome one. It provides a major opportunity for the NCCA to address comprehensively a curriculum area whose effective redevelopment and implementation we know can contribute in significant and meaningful ways to the lives of children and young people in our schools.

The commencement of a review of RSE by the Joint Committee on Education and Skills is timely and we look forward to benefiting from its deliberations and findings on an ongoing basis as both reviews advance.

**Chairman:** I thank Mr. Hammond. We will now hear from the members, starting with

Deputy Thomas Byrne.

**Deputy Thomas Byrne:** I will not delay the meeting unnecessarily. I seek a “Yes” or “No” in answer to my question. Is the document “Relationships and Sexuality Education – An Aspect of Social, Personal and Health Education”, published in 1996 by the NCCA, still the curriculum?

**Chairman:** We will take a number of questions together, and then the answers.

**Deputy Thomas Byrne:** My other questions follow on from my first. Is it still on the curriculum? It is on the website of the Department.

**Dr. Suzanne Dillon:** It is the curriculum but it is not the only component of the curriculum.

**Deputy Thomas Byrne:** There was some misinterpretation of our objection to the socialists’ Bill. We were accused of being motivated by religious reasons or whatever. That was not the case; our rationale was that we genuinely do not like to have any type of curriculum written down in legislation. It does not mean politicians cannot be involved but it means we do not write it down in legislation.

I have a number of questions on the curriculum. I suspect not many people have read the document. I have concerns about it because quite a few of the textbooks recommended by that curriculum are religious textbooks. There is one called *The Challenge of God*, by Niall Boyle. It could be read in regard to sexually transmitted diseases. It could be referred to in regard to personal integrity and family planning. There is another text that I assume is religious, published by publisher of religious books called Lifeways. It is also listed as relevant reading on personal integrity and gender discrimination. Why would religious textbooks be set down as part of the course curriculum for a non-religious subject? I make clear that I have no objection to the teaching of religion of any ethos but question why there is an intermingling in this case. It would not be allowed in science. We would be told one could not substitute the Book of Genesis for textbooks on evolution. Why, therefore, were the textbooks I have listed ever listed on the curriculum? Ms Sexton says the curriculum is mandatory and that the ethos of the school should not affect it, but the Department is listing religious textbooks that could be used in the programme. She did say, however, that it could be taught in light of the ethos. I would like her to expand on that a little more. I was shocked by the books listed when I did read the curriculum.

**Deputy Catherine Martin:** I thank the delegates for the submissions. I have a number of questions. At senior cycle, is the requirement to do RSE applicable to students doing the applied leaving certificate programme?

I read the Department’s submission to the Joint Committee on the Eighth Amendment of the Constitution. The submission stated that RSE, at senior cycle, is still based on an interim curriculum from 2011. Is a seven-year interim curriculum the norm? To me, a seven-year interim curriculum seems quite lengthy. RSE is one of five strands that make up the SPHE curriculum. Why is RSE the only one to be delivered? Does the Department intend to deliver the other four strands?

I respectfully suggest that the gender studies strand needs to be updated and I ask that it be updated as part of the review. The gender studies strand only refers to male and female experiences. Everything is described in the language of both genders rather than referring to the spectrum of gender identity.



My next group of questions is for the NCCA. The Stay Safe programme is centred around children learning to say, “No”, get away and tell. Does the NCCA believe enough has been done to deal with the issue of consent? Are children being taught to be cognisant not only of their own comfort and boundaries but those of others? Finally, when were the RSE resources last updated?

**Deputy Hildegarde Naughton:** I thank the witnesses for their presentations. I was a member of the Joint Committee on the Eighth Amendment of the Constitution. On the occasion when the Department met that committee, it was very clear that there was a lot of inconsistency in schools in terms of the teaching of sex education. I want to ask about the external facilitators who are brought into schools. Are their qualifications vetted? The witnesses have mentioned that it is advised that the class teacher remains in the classroom with a facilitator. Do facilitators require a certain standard or qualification? Are they vetted beforehand to ensure that they have the correct qualifications?

A concern has been raised here about religious ethos affecting the teaching of the facts of life. We must ensure that young people, be it in primary or post-primary education, are taught the facts about sex as opposed to a religious influence being exerted on such education. A number of witnesses mentioned that many young people get information on relationships and sex education via social media. I hope that situation will form a big part of the Minister’s review, which is welcome.

Sadly, pornography is now a huge issue for young people. I heard the statistic that young people now reach puberty much earlier, for whatever reasons. Parents are in denial if they believe their children aged ten or 11 years have not seen pornography or not had access to same. We need to tackle access to pornography at an earlier age and in both primary and post-primary education.

I would like to discuss teacher training. I come from a primary teaching background. Teachers may have been trained ten, 15 or 20 years ago and I believe continuing professional development should be provided to teachers. Many teachers do not feel confident enough to teach their pupils sex education and educate them about relationships. Teachers would be more willing to teach the subject if they had appropriate supports. Perhaps the subject could be taught by a teacher and external facilitator at the same time. A lot more should be done in this area. I was lucky enough to avail of an excellent teacher training course at Mary Immaculate College and I believe teachers need continuing professional development. Parents play a big role in teaching their children about sex and relationships.

RSE is not just about sex education. It is about relationships, emotions and well-being. The education system needs to adopt a holistic approach to life and relationships if we want seriously to consider not only the sexual health of young people but inform them in a holistic, balanced and factual way.

**Deputy Kathleen Funchion:** A streamlined approach has been adopted for the teaching of every other subject that is taught in primary and secondary schools, yet sex education is taught in an *ad hoc* fashion. Many schools do not even bother to teach sex education either due to teachers feeling uncomfortable with doing so or due to the ethos of the school. Is there oversight by the Department? Do school inspectors check whether the subject is taught in schools? Do they check the content of the programme and what is taught? From what I have learned from my own children going to school, there is great emphasis placed on the traditional family model. The talk seems to always be about getting married and having a baby. It is hard to be-

lieve that such an approach is still being taught in this day and age given that there are now so many different types of families. As well as all of the issues around consent, it is very dangerous to put the idea into the minds of children that maybe or somehow, if a person does not come from a traditional family, he or she is different in a negative way. Is there oversight in terms of the programme? There is a lot of oversight when it comes to the other subjects and people keep an eye on what is taught. With sex education the approach seems to differ. The approach is not to talk about it because the subject is uncomfortable for everyone, and if some schools teach it, that is great, but if some schools teach it better than others, then that is all right too. No great emphasis is placed on teaching sex education properly. Sex education is being taught to 11 and 12 year olds but I believe that is too late for some children.

Deputy Catherine Martin mentioned the Stay Safe programme. Unfortunately, not every school teaches the programme and I also believe the curriculum is all over the place. What role does the Department or NCCA play in terms of oversight?

**Deputy Tony McLoughlin:** I thank the witnesses for their attendance. I am inclined to agree with some of the questions that have been asked.

Social media usage by young people is one of the areas that I am very concerned about. Social media is used at a very early age in some schools. Some parents have brought to my attention the shocking amount of information to which young children are exposed now. I agree with my colleague who mentioned that social media has an influence on sex education, pornography or whatever. Social media also has implications for the mental health of young people, including in terms of bullying and various other things. I am very concerned about these matters and the witnesses have outlined the level of same very well.

I have spoken to some teachers and quite a number of parents who were members of a school board up until recently. It is vital that training for teachers in sex education is provided. It is vitally important that young students, particularly those in national schools, are provided with sex education. I am also concerned about the amount of time that young people spend on social media platforms using iPhones or whatever technology. I ask the witnesses to comment on this matter.

**Chairman:** Deputy Paul Murphy is welcome to attend this meeting and pose questions.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** I thank the Chairman for arranging these important sessions. Do the witnesses agree that there is a major problem with the way RSE is delivered to school students, especially in terms of LGBTQ+ relationships, gender identity, contraception, sexual health, and consent?

Religious ethos is a key issue for the committee and the NCCA. Such ethos was at the heart of the Bill that we brought forward and was passed on Second Stage. We did not attempt to rewrite the curriculum. The issue of religious ethos was recommended to be tackled by the Joint Committee on the Eighth Amendment of the Constitution. Do the witnesses accept that we cannot deal with the issue of guaranteeing a quality, modern and progressive relationship and sexual education without dealing with the question of religious ethos and the ability in the Education Act 1998 of school boards of management to say their religious ethos trumps other things? Is it not the case that we could have the most advanced RSE curriculum in the world and yet, as things stand, a board of management could say this contravenes its religious ethos in terms of contraception, abortion, LGBTQ+ relationships or whatever and it is not going to teach it? Does the Department feel that these issues can be addressed without dealing with the



obstacle of religious ethos in the Education Act? Is the NCCA going to review the implications of religious ethos in the review that is under way? If it is not planning to do that, is it willing to incorporate that into the review?

**Chairman:** The Bill has been referred to this committee and we will be dealing with that down the line. The stakeholders were not invited to comment on that Bill. It was also agreed today that the stakeholders would be invited to comment on the current model. I appreciate that as civil and public servants they may not be able to comment on policy and what it should be, but we are also concerned with the implementation of policy.

I have one or two queries which are not unrelated to what has just been asked. Parents quite often choose schools for their children based on the ethos provided. Is it the case that parents will have a significant say on a proposed new model of RSE? Do they have a say in the current model? Will the witnesses expand on whether circular 13/2018, which makes religious education optional, has the potential to make RSE optional? What impact would that have on the well-being programme? Do the witnesses have any insight into international best practice that might work here?

*Deputy Thomas Byrne took the Chair.*

**Dr. Suzanne Dillon:** I am going to deal with some of the questions about the ethos. I thank the Chair for reminding us about the focus of the meeting because it gives me a sense of direction for my response. It is important to remember that all schools are required to teach all aspects of the RSE programme at primary and post-primary level. Ethos might have an impact in terms of the method in which that is done or the resources that are chosen to deliver it. However, schools do not have the option of leaving out aspects of the programme.

Deputy Thomas Byrne had asked whether the programme that is available is that designed in 1996. I gave the Deputy a quick answer to that. That programme has been significantly supplemented since that time by a range of resources, and it may be of interest to members of this committee to visit the professional development and support service for teachers where the up-to-date resources are available.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Thomas Byrne):** The 1996 document is still the curriculum.

**Dr. Suzanne Dillon:** It is still the curriculum.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Thomas Byrne):** The books I referenced, including *The Challenge of God*, and the video entitled Lifeways are still recommended materials.

**Dr. Suzanne Dillon:** Yes. The Department does not recommend textbooks, but it does identify, where possible, resources a school might choose to use. I cannot say why those particular materials were recommended at that time. I presume they reflected a culture around that time. Today, the Department develops a range of resources, through its professional development and support services and through the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, NCCA, and does not recommend any particular textbook. Those resources are developed in collaboration with a number of other agencies. My colleague, Ms Sexton, identified some of those.

It is a reality that the review will have to look at how RSE is implemented in order that real evidence is gathered to support the anecdotal impression. Perhaps Mr. Hammond will speak further about the focus of the review. I do not use the word “anecdotal” in a pejorative sense, but the anecdotal evidence we have suggests that there are issues around the implementation. It

is not purely anecdotal. We do have some evidence which draws on inspections in schools and other research that has been conducted which shows that ethos may well have an impact on how students hear what is being said to them and how the material is handled. We also know that it may be cited by some teachers as preventing them from feeling very confident in dealing with the issues that exist. The review will very likely inquire into that matter.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Thomas Byrne):** I want to be clear, because I believe there were several questions on this. Is the witness saying that, under the Education Act, the ethos should not affect the teaching?

**Dr. Suzanne Dillon:** It should not affect the content of what is taught, but it may affect the resources that are used and the approach that is taken.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Thomas Byrne):** It is not allowed to affect the content.

**Dr. Suzanne Dillon:** It is not.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Thomas Byrne):** Is that not a Jesuitical distinction?

**Dr. Suzanne Dillon:** The Deputy is correct. What is taught and how it is taught should run side by side. The reality, however, is that the 1998 legislation provides that a school has the right to protect its ethos.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Thomas Byrne):** Would that right be upheld in a science class if a school decided to teach creationism or decided to use a resource that espoused creationism instead of evolution in a science textbook? That issue is being debated in the North of Ireland and in the United States.

**Dr. Suzanne Dillon:** I cannot answer that question.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Thomas Byrne):** I accept that it probably has never arisen.

**Dr. Suzanne Dillon:** I could not answer that question

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Thomas Byrne):** It seems to me that if it is allowed to happen in RSE, it would be allowed in science.

**Dr. Suzanne Dillon:** I cannot answer that question.

**Deputy Catherine Martin:** The witness stated that the ethos may have an impact on how students hear what is being presented. Surely what students hear being presented is that which is said. The ethos, therefore, would have a major impact on what is being presented.

**Dr. Suzanne Dillon:** It may well be. That is one of the reasons the review is charged with looking at the implementation of the curriculum.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Thomas Byrne):** The witness is saying that legally it should not impact-----

**Dr. Suzanne Dillon:** It should not have an impact on the content of what is taught. I made the comment about what a student would hear in response to Deputy Paul Murphy's question about being a bit Jesuitical in separating them out.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Thomas Byrne):** I apologise for delaying the meeting but I

believe all the members had questions around that point. Are there any other questions on that point?

**Senator Grace O’Sullivan:** What is the cultural impact of teaching RSE? I lived in the Netherlands for years, and the methodology of teaching a subject such as RSE is that it is taught factually, and there is a cultural awareness of the importance of the individuals involved. It is critical that the correct information is taught and that it is applied across the board. Is this happening in Ireland?

**Dr. Suzanne Dillon:** We do not have sufficient evidence to give a “Yes” or “No” answer to that question. The review will inquire into that and provide us with up-to-date evidence on it. There is an issue around teacher competence and confidence, which was referenced by Deputy Naughton. There is an extensive programme of continuing professional development, CPD, available to teachers. We know that the review will look at the manner in which CPD is accessed by teachers, whether it is the same teacher accessing it and thereby developing a rich bank of skills in this area or a variety of teachers doing so. The research should look at issues of competence and confidence as it is a real issue.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Thomas Byrne):** That comprehensively answers many of the questions raised. I am conscious that the meeting has to finish by 6 o’clock. I do not want to rush any contributors.

**Ms Rita Sexton:** I want to mention briefly outside facilitators who come into schools. The content of what they deliver is not vetted. Obviously, Garda vetting for the individual is required. They are not required to have any particular qualifications. I would say that the decision to bring in external facilitators is made by the whole school. The board of management would also be involved in that decision. In the context of work that is being undertaken within the Department in the area of well-being, we are considering sending out more detailed advice to schools around that issue. At the moment, advice to schools is covered in the circulars to schools around the subject of SPHE, but we are going to expand on that advice and make it very clear to schools that they need to think carefully about who they choose to bring in and that they have to ensure that the teacher is very much a part of the programme.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Thomas Byrne):** I am glad that issue is being looked at. This issue applies not just to sex education but to all aspects of the curriculum. There are guest speakers on many subjects and there is no quality control involved. I am glad that Ms Sexton has mentioned that matter.

**Mr. John Hammond:** I will take a few of the questions posed. Much of the commentary and many of the questions relate to implementation. A member asked if the NCCA has a specific role in oversight of implementation. We do not. Our job is to advise on the curriculum and assessment arrangements for early childhood, primary and post-primary schools. It is through being given the opportunity to undertake extensive reviews, however, that we can take a close look at the reality of what is happening in the school in a given area of the curriculum. That is why we are approaching this area of review in a positive light. With regard to the discussion we had a few moments ago about ethos, one of the positive things about the brief the NCCA has been given in the review is that we must look at the delivery of the curriculum to students, the transactions that happen at ground level and the interactions that are taking place in classrooms. We will be able to go into schools and talk to students, teachers and parents about that. I hope that will throw significant light on the reality of situations in schools and the ethos and climate through which RSE is being delivered.

Deputy Catherine Martin asked whether enough is being done about consent, particularly at the lower levels of primary schooling. Again, the review will look at that in much greater detail. One of the reasons that RSE was embedded in social, personal and health education in the curriculum at all levels was that there are many aspects of the skills that are encouraged through SPHE that are very relevant to RSE as well. Generating the capacity for children and young people to make informed decisions, to negotiate, to be assertive, to manage feelings and to deal with stress are all part and parcel of SPHE programmes, and the fact that RSE is integrated into those programmes means that, where it is well thought out and well delivered, students manage to make a clear connection between the two. In many ways we could focus on the single word “consent”, but there are many other skill areas that are relevant in that context as well. Many of those are delivered through SPHE and also through broader schooling.

My colleague, Ger Halbert, will give detail on some of the questions about the curriculum that were posed.

**Ms Ger Halbert:** When the more recent curricula in SPHE were being developed, obviously we would have looked at the 1996 interim guidelines. As John Hammond said, it was a very collaborative process. For example, when we were developing the SPHE framework at senior cycle, in particular the RSE strand, we would have referenced it, but then we would have had a conversation about young people at this time and in this place and their particular needs.

There was a question about the five strands in the senior cycle framework. That is an important question. Within the five strands there is an area of learning on mental health, there is one on substance use, there is one on gender studies and there is one on physical activity and nutrition. The aim of the framework is to allow young people to make informed decisions about their health and well-being, and the thinking was that decisions around RSE and the skills, values, knowledge and understanding are very much scaffolded by the learning in other areas of learning. This framework would be used by the support service for senior cycle SPHE when it is addressing different topics when working with teachers.

The short course in SPHE was also done collaboratively. We worked closely with teachers and others who are working in the area of SPHE. The way that transacted was that rather than putting RSE out on its own, learning in RSE was threaded through the four strands. There are four strands in the short course. The first is “Who am I?”, which is that sense of oneself, one’s self-awareness, what is important to the person and the person’s values. That is what stands to the person when developing the skills he or she needs in relationships and in terms of the person’s sexual health. The next is “Minding myself and others”, because it is not just about oneself but everybody with whom one interacts. The third strand is “Team up”, which addresses specifically issues around RSE. The fourth is “My mental health”, how a person is in terms of minding his or her mental health and developing positive coping strategies. Again, that would scaffold the types of skills one needs in relationships and sexuality education.

There are many different approaches to this internationally. The Netherlands has a particular one, as do Denmark and Germany. They begin this work back in early childhood and build on it. Different countries do it in different ways and in many countries it has been very well evaluated. We have huge learning in looking at how they do that. When I look at the curriculum now at early childhood, primary, junior cycle and post-primary senior cycle, there are real opportunities there for learning in relationships and sexuality. There is a great deal there that is good on which we can build.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Thomas Byrne):** I have a brief question, and I will refer

back to the members for short comments. We will keep it brief and try to complete this session, which has been very helpful. From whom will the NCCA seek advice as it carries out this review? Will it be anybody or just the council? Deputy Catherine Martin also has a brief question.

**Deputy Catherine Martin:** I asked earlier about students doing the leaving certificate applied. Is it a requirement that they study RSE? With regard to the interim curriculum, how long can a curriculum be interim? It appears to be seven or eight years here. Is that the norm with any other subject? Regarding the gender studies strand, does the NCCA intend to review the language? The language only refers to both genders. When were the RSE resource materials last updated?

**Deputy Kathleen Funchion:** With regard to the NCCA and the oversight, are there schools that have not been teaching this for years? I am not referring to SPHE at secondary level but at primary level, where it appears to be almost voluntary. By fifth or sixth class one needs to be saying something to students about it.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** Is the NCCA going to look at the impact of ethos in the review that is taking place? Is it within the remit of the NCCA to recommend a change to something like that at the end of the process?

**Senator Grace O'Sullivan:** With regard to the review, when Mr. Hammond talks about stakeholders, does he include the children or pupils? From my knowledge from speaking to young first year pupils in the area around Tramore in County Waterford, they appear to be ahead of the teachers in their knowledge and information. In fact, one young fellow told me they were laughing at the incompetence of the teacher, to their minds, with regard to the teaching. If they were giddy or laughing, it was because of the teacher in this regard. It is critical that the pupils are included as part of the stakeholder network when it comes to a review.

**Mr. John Hammond:** When the NCCA conducts a review, it does so through all the stakeholders. All the traditional stakeholders are involved, such as teacher unions, management bodies, business interests, the social pillar and so forth. Much of the time in a review we are working directly with networks of schools, and that very much includes the student voice. We have worked with the student and children's voice in the development of Aistear, the early childhood framework. It is a significant feature of the work we are doing as part of the ongoing review of the primary curriculum. We are directly engaged in a Europe-wide study of the student voice at post-primary level. We view the student voice as a critical element of what we do.

Deputy Byrne asked what the review will consist of and the NCCA will discuss this in a couple of days to work out the precise detail of what might be involved. Reviews are typically conducted through the NCCA structures. As part of a network of curriculum agencies, the NCCA can access international contexts.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Thomas Byrne):** To be clear, the council will do the review. Will the NCCA put out a call for public submissions?

**Mr. John Hammond:** Yes.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Thomas Byrne):** Will the NCCA contact the various organisations, including the patrons and providers like Accord?

**Mr. John Hammond:** Yes. In my opening statement, I said that as part of the second main



element of the review we will make contact with key people, organisations and institutions that have been involved in this area and have a track record in it, including support services, people within the stakeholder bodies and people who have produced resource materials that they have evaluated. That will be a very important part of the review. Equally, we will look at academic research and international research in this area. The aspect of the brief for the review that we most strongly welcome is the brief to go into schools, to work with schools and to find out the reality of what is taking place in classrooms. This brings me back to Deputy Paul Murphy's question. We envisage that where it pertains to questions of ethos, we will report and comment on what we see and on the evidence we generate. At this point, I cannot point in the direction of particular recommendations. This is within the scope of this review.

**Deputy Catherine Martin:** With regard to the question of going into schools, are there inspections of RSE at present? Are such inspections included in the so-called "drive-bys" or are there official inspections? Is there anything about students' experience of RSE or parents' knowledge of the RSE curriculum in the management, leadership and learning, MLL, surveys of parents and students? I would have thought it would be essential to gather such information during detailed MLL inspections.

**Mr. John Hammond:** That is a question for the Department.

**Dr. Suzanne Dillon:** The answer to the Deputy's question is "Yes". All of our MLLs and whole-school evaluations, WSEs, inquire into the delivery of the full range of the curriculum. That is looked at very carefully. As part of those inspections, parents are asked if they have been informed of the school's RSE policy. On average, between 94% and 96% of parents agree that they are aware of the policy. Deputy Funchion asked about the position at primary level. As part of the WSEs and MLLs at primary level, we make the same inquiry into whether the SPHE programme is delivered. RSE is integral to that. When we come across evidence of a difficulty, we name it and make recommendations in that regard. At post-primary level, we have a long-established subject inspection that is specifically devoted to SPHE and this looks at RSE. We published composite findings in that regard in 2014. We are looking at whether it is timely to repeat that kind of thematic evaluation.

**Deputy Catherine Martin:** Is that at senior level?

**Dr. Suzanne Dillon:** Yes.

**Deputy Catherine Martin:** Okay.

**Dr. Suzanne Dillon:** At primary level, in 2016 we introduced a new model which focuses on particular aspects of the SPHE curriculum. As this is a relatively new part of the system, we do not have a sufficient body of evidence to make a statement at system level. There are specific processes in place to look at the delivery of SPHE in schools.

**Deputy Catherine Martin:** It seems to me that merely asking whether a parent is aware of the school's RSE policy is not sufficiently probing of the parent's level of satisfaction with the RSE programme. Perhaps this is something that needs to be reviewed. Maybe parents should be asked if they are content with the school's RSE policy and if it has been explained in detail to them. To ask simply whether they are aware of it seems very general.

**Dr. Suzanne Dillon:** I take that point. The number of questions one can ask in a questionnaire is limited. Over recent years, we have focused specifically on how bullying is handled in schools. We are reviewing our set of questions at the moment.



**Deputy Catherine Martin:** I also asked how long a curriculum under the leaving certificate applied programme can be allowed to stay in place as an interim programme.

**Dr. Suzanne Dillon:** All senior cycle students must do a programme in RSE.

**Deputy Catherine Martin:** How long is an interim curriculum allowed to stay in place? Surely the word “interim” indicates that it is temporary by its very nature.

**Dr. Suzanne Dillon:** It is really a misnomer.

**Ms Ger Halbert:** Schools draw on the more recent curriculum.

**Dr. Suzanne Dillon:** Yes.

**Ms Ger Halbert:** They would use the short course, the junior cycle framework and the senior cycle framework. They would not be looking back to 1996.

**Deputy Catherine Martin:** I am asking about what was submitted in 2011.

**Ms Ger Halbert:** The Deputy is referring to the senior cycle SPHE curriculum.

**Deputy Catherine Martin:** Yes.

**Ms Ger Halbert:** I think that is a really good point about the gender studies. It shows how fast things move. We need to go back and look. We need to keep making sure it is up to date and fit for purpose.

**Deputy Catherine Martin:** This interim curriculum has been in place since 2011.

**Ms Ger Halbert:** No, it is not an interim curriculum. It is a published curriculum that has been approved by the council of the NCCA. I take it that the Deputy is talking about the senior cycle curriculum framework.

**Deputy Catherine Martin:** Yes.

**Dr. Suzanne Dillon:** The Deputy is correct. It is labelled “interim”-----

**Ms Ger Halbert:** Is it? I am sorry.

**Dr. Suzanne Dillon:** -----but it is the actual curriculum.

**Deputy Catherine Martin:** It is mislabelled.

**Dr. Suzanne Dillon:** It is a misnomer.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Thomas Byrne):** I thank Dr. Dillon, Ms Sexton, Mr. Hammond and Ms Halbert. I found their answers to our questions concise and clear. We might not have liked all the answers, but I commend the witnesses on the manner in which they were delivered. It was very useful to have them here to set out the context. If anything further occurs to them, they are invited to get back in touch with the committee. We intend to send our report on this issue to the NCCA and probably to the Department as well. We are not going to write the curriculum. We hope to forward to the NCCA the information we glean from everyone else who comes in here. I think I am speaking on behalf of the committee - members can correct me if I am wrong - when I say we would like to see this done as quickly as possible while ensuring it is done in a proper way. I think that is the objective of everyone here. We will suspend briefly

while the next set of witnesses take their seats. I thank the witnesses from the Department and the NCCA for their co-operation.

*Sitting suspended at 4.57 p.m. and resumed at 4.58 p.m.*

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Thomas Byrne):** The purpose of this part of the meeting is to continue to engage with stakeholders as part of our review of relationships and sexuality education, RSE. I welcome Ms Áine Lynch, who is the chief executive of the National Parents Council Primary; Mr. Geoff Browne, who is the president of the National Parents Council Post-Primary; Mr. Eboni Burke, who is the welfare and equality officer of the Irish Second-Level Students' Union; Ms Maeve McCafferty of the Irish National Teachers' Organisation; Ms Moira Leydon, who is the assistant general secretary of the Association of Secondary Teachers in Ireland; Mr. David Duffy, who is the education and research officer of the Teachers' Union of Ireland; and Ms Valerie Lewis, who is the second level support officer of Education and Training Boards Ireland, ETBI.

I note that the general secretary of Education and Training Boards Ireland, Mr. Michael Moriarty, retired yesterday and has been replaced by Ms Nessa Doyle. On behalf of the committee, I wish Mr. Moriarty well in his retirement and thank him for his assistance to the committee. We wish Ms Doyle well in her new role. There is no doubt that we will have much engagement with her and her ETBI colleagues on this committee. We look forward to that. The format of this part of the meeting is that I will invite the witnesses to make a brief opening statement. I will be strict on the three minutes. This is to facilitate members in getting back to the Dáil, but I also believe we tend to get the same amount of information out of three minutes anyway so it works for everybody. That will be followed by an engagement similar to that the witnesses have seen.

Before we begin, I draw the witnesses' attention to the fact that by virtue of section 17(2) (l) of the Defamation Act 2009, witnesses are protected by absolute privilege in respect of their evidence to the committee. However, if they are directed by the Chairperson or myself to cease giving evidence on a particular matter and continue to do so, they are entitled thereafter only to qualified privilege in respect of their evidence. They are directed that only evidence connected with the subject matter of these proceedings is to be given and asked to respect the parliamentary practice to the effect that, where possible, they should not criticise or make charges against any person or entity by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable. I also advise witnesses that any opening statements they have provided to the committee will be published on its website after this meeting.

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 Houses or an official, either by name or in such a way as to make him or her identifiable.

I call on Ms Áine Lynch of the National Parents Council Primary to make her opening statement.

**Ms Áine Lynch:** In the first instance, the National Parents Council, NPC, welcomes the Joint Committee on Education and Skills' review of sexual health and relationships education. It is important that all curriculum areas are reviewed regularly to ensure that they are following up-to-date, evidence-based practice. As parts of the current relationships and sexuality education, RSE, programme have not been updated in more than 20 years it seems that the RSE curriculum is overdue for a review. This is particularly urgent for children who are now living in

an increasingly sexualised world. Children are increasingly exposed to information and images that are beyond their maturity and of which they can often struggle to make sense. The RSE programme is one of the resources, along with family and peers, that children have to manage this challenging environment.

Due to the tight timeframe for this submission it has not been possible to consult parents specifically on this topic. NPC would welcome a further period to consult with parents directly on this issue if this was feasible. NPC is in contact with parents on an ongoing basis, however, and does deliver services to parents regarding the RSE programme in schools, which enables us to keep abreast of the issues for parents. NPC delivers helpline and training services to parents. Specifically, it provides a training programme online and face-to-face for parents entitled “Supporting Parents to Support Their Children to Build Healthy Friendships and Relationships”. These sessions support parents to develop strong relationships with their children but also explore what children are learning within the RSE programme in their schools.

Some of the main issues that parents raise at primary school level include: age-appropriate information - in trying to respond to children’s queries regarding sexualisation in the media parents are often concerned that children are needing information earlier and earlier; relationship development, including friendships; social media; sexualisation of media and advertising; content of the RSE programme and how it is taught in school; morals and ethics and where they fit into today’s world; and increased tolerance for and prevalence of sexualised language.

In addition to these issues, NPC believes that the RSE programme in primary schools should look at the area of consent in an age- and context-appropriate way. It is essential that parents and children are involved in the discussion of planning and teaching the RSE curriculum. It is also essential that parents are supported to support their children in the area of relationships and sexuality education so that there is a partnership between home and school in this important curriculum area. How the RSE curriculum is taught in school, and by whom, should be reviewed with input from all stakeholders and special attention and effort should be put into getting the parents’ and children’s opinion both at a national policy and at a school implementation level. NPC welcomes this review and welcomes the opportunity it has been given to feed into the discussion. We would be eager to consult with parents directly to give a more direct parents’ voice to the committee if the committee felt that this would be useful.

*Deputy Fiona O’Loughlin resumed the Chair.*

**Chairman:** I thank Ms Lynch. I appreciate that she did not have the opportunity to consult with everybody. We would certainly be happy to hear more further down the line. I call on Mr. Geoff Browne who is representing the National Parents Council Post-Primary.

**Mr. Geoff Browne:** I thank the Cathaoirleach. The National Parents Council Post-Primary, NPCPP, is grateful to the joint committee for this opportunity. Our approach to this submission was to look at a number of reports and their findings. One report at which we looked was on the elements acknowledged to bring about high implementation of RSE within our schools. Some of the barriers found to this programme included: the overcrowded curriculum, which 82% of schools agreed was a problem; the need to complete so many courses in so many subjects, which 71% of schools agreed was a problem; the discomfort of some teachers in teaching RSE, which 71% of schools agreed was a problem; and the pressure of examination subjects, which 67% of schools agreed was a problem. Factors which would help “somewhat” or “a lot” in the implementation of RSE, according to the report, included: an expanded SPHE support service, which 87% of schools agreed would help; increased provision of in-service provision;

more outside facilitators in schools; greater involvement of parents; and changes in the RSE programme.

This report also detailed the elements which brought about a high level of implementation of the RSE programme. While this report was carried out ten years ago, many of these elements are still relevant and are, by and large, a matter of common sense and a realistic investment in the delivery of any programme. These are laid out in more detail in our actual submission but elements included the co-ordination of SPHE and RSE, parental involvement, the status of RSE, teacher training, teacher comfort, clarity among teachers about what can be taught, student perspectives and understanding, and the support of the whole school. These would be clear indicators as to some of the resources, supports and strategies which would need to be in place for the successful introduction of any content. In particular we feel the following factors are essential: parental involvement, student involvement, teacher comfort and knowledge, an agreed RSE policy, and priority and planning.

There has been a steady introduction of consent classes at third level, some compulsory, some facilitated by the colleges and some facilitated by student unions. Students attending these have expressed the opinion that third level is too late as the age of consent is 17 and a percentage of students do not attend third level. Technology and access to instant and extensive information has impacted on the type of content we now need to deliver in any health-related subject in our schools. The many advances in media and the manner in which programmes are now streamed into homes mean that young people receive informal and unsupervised information about relationships and sexuality outside of the classroom setting. Young people are already exposed to a variety of sexual practices and attitudes through the media, particularly social media, television, film and magazines from a relatively young age. Social media has changed the way young people relate to each other. It has also meant that students at a young age are sharing inappropriate images of a personal nature with one another.

We know that children access pornography at a much younger age because of the Internet. The recent report, “Net Children Go Mobile”, confirmed that over 21% of children had seen sexual images either online or offline in the past 12 months. The type of content being viewed is influencing young people’s sexuality and influencing their expectation of what the relationships within a sexual relationship should be. A special Eurobarometer gender-based violence report published in November 2016 highlighted disturbing attitudes. This survey presented a series of different situations to respondents and examined whether any of these can ever justify sexual intercourse without consent. More than one in four respondents think sexual intercourse without consent can be justifiable. Overall, 27% say sexual intercourse without consent may be justified in at least one of the situations proposed. Respondents are most likely to say this about being drunk or on drugs, voluntarily going home with someone, wearing revealing or provocative clothing, or not clearly saying “No” or physically fighting back.

**Chairman:** I am going to have to cut Mr. Browne off in a minute. He might want to just make a final point.

**Mr. Geoff Browne:** I will. This was a European study and included Ireland. The NPCPP feels that positive reinforcement should be the method employed in teaching these issues to students as opposed to the negative. We need to teach our children to be aware of what they are saying yes to.

The world is moving so fast that parents and teachers need ongoing training and education themselves to keep up with the requirements to educate and protect our children. It is incum-

bent on all educators - teachers, schools, the Department of Education and Skills, parents and youth clubs, etc. - to work together to ensure that the required education for life is delivered properly and effectively to our children.

**Chairman:** I thank Mr. Browne.

**Mr. Geoff Browne:** There is more in the report.

**Chairman:** Mr. Browne got it said. I thank him for that. I now call on Ms Eboni Burke, who is representing the Irish Second-Level Students' Union.

**Ms Eboni Burke:** My name is Eboni Burke and I am the welfare and equality officer for the Irish Second-Level Students' Union, ISSU. I thank the committee for the invitation to present today and we would like to acknowledge the committee's continued interest in the student voice and the opinions of our membership. The Irish Second-Level Students' Union works towards an education system where the views, opinions and contributions of students are respected and in which students are recognised as an official partner in the education system. Our submission has been shaped by our national student executive, current ISSU policy and a member's survey which received over 780 responses in two days.

RSE is an area of huge importance to ISSU and we have lobbied on this issue over the past few years. We welcome the review of RSE and also welcome the progression of the Provision of Objective Sex Education Bill 2018 to Committee Stage. ISSU firmly believes that there should be one RSE module for every school and that the patronage of the school should not impact on the type or quality of RSE that students receive. We believe all lessons should be non-gender-normative and inclusive of all sexualities.

I will now discuss some of the results of our student survey. These findings emphasise the need for drastic changes in how RSE is taught in schools. The disparity in the responses to most questions, but in particular those of when and how often this education was received, was particularly worrying. Regarding the frequency of RSE, over 87.5% of students said they did not have RSE regularly. We recommend that RSE classes be part of a timetabled curriculum in senior cycle as it is with SPHE in junior cycle. Under the topics of importance, there were six options, and consent ranked the highest, with 42.3%, ahead of sexual health, contraception, sexuality and identity. ISSU is concerned about the lack of education surrounding consent, which is widely available at third level through workshops and campaigns. We believe consent workshops should be mandatory. Some 28.1% of students said they received no contraceptive education at all. We recognise that education will undoubtedly lower the rates of teenage pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections and diseases. I cannot go into all the questions in too much detail, but the following are some of the other results I wish to highlight. Some 65% of students said they had not learned about consent, 61% of students said they had not learned about sexuality, 85.7% said they had not learned about gender identity and 87.3% said they did not think LGBTQ+ issues had been discussed or explained sufficiently. The results speak for themselves, and it is clear that the content is being affected. Regarding teachers or providers of RSE, 72.1% of students said the teaching of this aspect was bad or terrible. ISSU believes these results are not necessarily the teachers' fault. It may be the content, or lack thereof, or a lack of appropriate teacher training which contributes to the students' disapproval. It is essential that the proper training be put in place for teachers if they are to be the main providers of RSE. Teachers must not influence the class with personal opinions and must remain neutral in all aspects of debate or divided opinion within the class. Similarly, any outside providers coming in must obviously be certified by the Department of Education and Skills.



We believe it is paramount to give students the information and support to develop coping mechanisms to prevent and deal with mental health problems, including how to deal with the breakup of a relationship, how to support a peer during a crisis situation and how to identify abuse in a relationship. This should be a proactive measure instead of a reactive measure, which is often the case.

Regarding digital sexual education, the sharing of explicit self-generated images, or sexting, has become rampant. In a recent survey taken by students at Colaiste Bríde, in Clondalkin, two out of three students said they had received or had been asked for sexually explicit images, photographs or messages. ISSU applauds the work of Webwise in conjunction with An Garda Síochána in developing both the #BeInCtrl resource, which provides tips on how to protect oneself online, and the Lockers resource, which gives information for schools on the sharing of explicit self-generated images. We recommend that both resources be mandatory course material.

Regarding drugs and alcohol awareness education, it is essential that substantial drug awareness occurs in secondary school. In 2017, we carried out a survey with *drugs.ie* and found that 95% of young Irish people found cannabis easy to access, 88% found alcohol easy to access, 58% found MDMA easy to access and 37% found cocaine easy to access.

**Chairman:** I have to be off in a few moments so I will give Ms Burke one last sentence.

**Ms Eboni Burke:** Our research illustrates how sexual activities and psychoactive drug use interact to cause harm.

I will skip ahead to my conclusion. Many changes need to be made urgently to the way in which relationships and sexuality education is taught in this country. Our main recommendations are that we must develop a one-size-fits-all RSE and SPHE model to which every school must adhere, regardless of patronage. We must ensure that classrooms are inclusive of all students in terms of sexuality and gender identity and that all students are given accurate and reliable medical information and guidance on sexual health and prevention. We ask that the NCCA consult directly with ISSU as the representative body for second level students in Ireland.

**Chairman:** I thank Ms Burke. I now move to Ms Maeve McCafferty, who is representing the INTO.

**Ms Maeve McCafferty:** Overall, the INTO welcomes the recent commitment to review RSE. However, any reconsideration must be within the context of wider primary redevelopments which are under way by the NCCA. There is an escalating workload issue in schools, and any change must be mediated at a reasonable pace and within an agreed time to ensure effective implementation. Curriculum review cannot be the only response to every emerging issue in society. There is no doubt but that schools have a very important role to play, but they do not operate in isolation from broader society. Children are also very much influenced by values and practices that prevail in their home environments and in the broader community. An INTO survey showed there was a favourable response from teachers to the teaching of RSE, although there was some initial trepidation on the part of teachers in taking on the role of teaching children about sensitive and personal matters. However, it was also noted that good in-service increased confidence levels significantly.

As RSE has a moral, ethical and spiritual dimension, its development is influenced by the ethos of the school. Currently, the RSE programme states that the RSE school policy will reflect the core values and ethos of the school. Consequently, many schools have policies on



RSE which reflect the overall characteristic spirit of the school. Therefore, the relationship between school ethos and the State curriculum will need to be addressed as part of this review. Children should have a right to inclusive, age-appropriate and factual information, and teachers need clarity and support on any potential conflict that may arise in respect of RSE and the school ethos.

In light of the sensitive and sometimes challenging nature of RSE, full and proper provision of continuing professional development, CPD, is essential to support teachers to feel confident and competent teaching RSE. Heretofore, substitutable professional development for teachers in RSE has been limited. The Professional Development Service for Teachers, PDST, is currently offering practical RSE workshops to teachers with in-school support. The INTO believes, however, that it is regrettable that no substitution is provided for these workshops. Furthermore, in light of the importance of RSE, the INTO is concerned that the CPD will not reach all teachers in a systematic way. Teachers have reported that the quality of CPD provided by the PDST has been of a high quality and has had a positive impact on the teaching of the subject. In this regard, the INTO recommends that if the Government is committed to a quality review, it must adequately resource the PDST to ensure that the provision of CPD is on a system-wide basis and accompanied by substitution.

RSE continues to be one of the aspects of SPHE for which some schools invite outside people to speak to pupils and, in some cases, parents as well. While teachers are considered to be the most appropriate people to teach all aspects of the curriculum, RSE has unique challenges, and different school contexts demand different approaches to RSE. The INTO is of the view that teachers and principals are best placed to use their professional judgment to determine whether an unbiased external body is required to work with students on delivering factual aspects of the RSE programme. Parental support is critical to the success of any curricular area, particularly RSE. Parents are the primary educators of their children and they provide moral, cultural and familial values for young children. A partnership approach by schools and parents helps to provide children with a consistent experience in RSE, enabling them to make connections between their lives at home, in the school and in the community.

**Chairman:** I ask Ms McCafferty to wrap up in a few seconds.

**Ms Maeve McCafferty:** The INTO notes that the current RSE programme states that the school policy will include provision for the rights of those who wish to withdraw their children from RSE. The INTO respects that parents have the right to withdraw their children from any aspect of the curriculum. However, withdrawing pupils can create significant challenges for teachers at local level. Therefore, the INTO recommends that the Department of Education and Skills put proper provision in place for schools to facilitate those parents who choose to absent their children from RSE.

Finally, the current RSE programme, while originally relevant and useful, needs to be updated to reflect developments since the 1990s. The INTO LGBT group developed a valuable resource, *Different Families, Same Love*, which should also be considered within the context of any RSE review as it includes good-practice guidelines for inclusive schools in line with the current SPHE curriculum objectives.

**Chairman:** I thank Ms McCafferty. I now move to Ms Moira Leydon of the ASTI.

**Ms Moira Leydon:** Good afternoon, everyone. I am blown away by the contributions. We have had a great amount of learning here, so I will just say a few things. First, it is important to

put on record that I think we all recognise the political leadership that has been shown on this matter, by the Minister in calling for the review, by this committee and by the Joint Committee on the Eighth Amendment of the Constitution, which has in very many ways given good direction. That is important. When I was doing my research for today, being interested in history, I went right back, and the reason we introduced RSE in 1993 was that we had the extraordinary national scandal of the Kilkenny incest case. It mobilised the political community at the time. I do not think we are at such a crisis at the moment but we certainly have a confluence of events that are impacting on our young people and are extremely serious. Ms Lynch adverted to some and Mr. Browne made reference to the Eurobarometer survey. The Department of Children and Youth Affairs produced a very detailed report in 2015 on the sexualisation and commercialisation of children in Ireland. It was deeply disturbing reading. The rationale for what is being done now is absolutely clear-cut.

The problems are well flagged. I do not like saying this glibly but I do think in this instance that we have that very classic Irish phenomenon of the rhetoric and reality gap. The rhetoric is that we have good programmes, etc., but what is happening? They are not hitting the ground and are not being done as they should be. What the ASTI can add to this debate is to identify what we see as sustaining that gap. I think we are talking about teacher training - initial teacher education and access to further learning, sustaining learning. Next - Dr. Dillon stole my terminology - is the confidence and capacity of teachers. Teachers do not have confidence. I was with some amazing teachers last Friday and they were horrified to think that I teach maths but also have to go and talk about consent, reproduction and sexual identity. These are really challenging issues. We have seen what happened with the junior cycle; teachers do not agree with aspects of the philosophy so they are resistant. We really have to grasp that confidence and capacity challenge. School leadership has not been mentioned. We really need to examine why school leadership is not engaged with this process in the ways it is expected to be. We also need to examine the capacity of schools to co-ordinate quite a complex area like this. We have adverted to this in terms of the capacity of schools, etc.

Ms Burke addressed the youth work survey that was published last Monday. We are really in a different situation now from 1993. Young people are telling us their experiences. They are telling us what they want. They are telling us they want good-quality, non-judgmental, factual information. They do not necessarily want it in certain ways but they certainly want it. This is really a sign of the maturity of young people. Certainly my generation did not verbalise many of the issues that today's generation is verbalising. As Ms Ger Halbert of the NCCA has said, we have very good guidance from other countries. We are getting guidance from our young people on what they want. I would echo the Acting Chairman, Deputy Thomas Byrne, who said we want this work to proceed quickly. We have a lot of good strengths to build on.

**Chairman:** I thank Ms Leydon and invite Mr. Duffy from the TUI to address the committee.

**Mr. David Duffy:** The TUI thanks the committee for the opportunity to make a submission on the review of sexual health and relationships education as announced by the Minister for Education and Skills. The TUI welcomes the review of the RSE programme. The context in which Irish education operates has changed significantly in the last 20 years and a review of RSE is timely. However, it is important to make a number of key points about the review.

Schools have a responsibility for delivering the RSE programme but, in the broader societal context, parents, guardians and families clearly have the primary responsibility in terms of fostering values and practices in sexual health and relationships that are positive and underpinned by respect for oneself and others. Indeed, Article 42 of the Constitution cites the family unit as

the primary educator. It should be noted that teachers generally would not consider their delivery of the RSE programme to be constrained by what was prescribed 20 years ago. In teaching RSE, teachers take into consideration developments in the intervening period. Therefore, they routinely address matters such as marriage equality, LGBTQ+, consent, contraception, safe use of social media etc. Indeed, not only are these matters addressed through RSE but they are also often captured as part of other subjects such as religious education, politics and society, computer science, CSPE and SPHE-pastoral care, and are also expected to be included in upcoming revised subject specifications for ICT as part of the leaving certificate applied programme. Schools need to be able to decide which teachers are best suited to teaching sensitive matters such as sexuality. Teachers must be able to access high-quality continuous professional development, CPD, to enable them to carry out this sensitive task. The Department has a responsibility to provide this CPD at a time and venue that is convenient to teachers.

The TUI has a concern that RSE is not available equally in all school settings. The TUI strongly supports the constitutional protection of religious freedom but also believes that RSE should be available to all students unless the parents of a student explicitly ask for their child to be exempt. The availability of RSE should not depend on the religious ethos or otherwise of the individual school.

It is important to note that RSE is considered a vital part of the well-being area of learning in the revised junior cycle. The well-being programme is a whole-school activity. It is quite possible that the opt-out provided for in circular 13/2018 may jeopardise the ability of schools to provide the well-being programme and may in fact constitute a breach of the junior cycle agreement between the unions and the Minister for Education and Skills.

The TUI is aware of reports that some materials and-or speakers being used to support the delivery of RSE in some schools may not be in line with best practice of independence and the provision of non-directive expert knowledge. The TUI believes that it can be useful for schools to use outside materials and-or speakers to support particular parts of the RSE programme. However, it is important that schools are confident that the materials or speaker are in line with best practice and that particular agendas are not pushed by the materials or speaker. It would be helpful to schools if the Department could develop additional resources that schools could then have confidence in using.

**Chairman:** Could Mr. Duffy please wrap up?

**Mr. David Duffy:** Okay. The TUI would like again to thank the committee for this opportunity to make a submission, and would of course welcome any questions members may have. The review of RSE is welcomed by the TUI. We believe that the review is timely. Schools have an important role to play in the area of RSE but responsibilities also fall to parents, communities and the Department of Education and Skills. 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.

**Chairman:** I thank Mr. Duffy. On a point of clarification, he said in the first sentence of his statement that he was happy to contribute to this as part of the ministerial review. This is a separate process. The Minister certainly has announced a review, which is very welcome. However, the committee's deliberations are completely separate. We will be informing the Minister and the Department of our recommendations and findings. If the TUI wishes to send a separate submission to the Department and the Minister, it is absolutely free to do so. This is

a separate process. It is worth pointing that out, just for the sake of clarification.

I invite Ms Lewis of Education and Training Boards Ireland, ETBI, to make her opening statement. My colleague congratulated Michael Moriarty on his 41 years of a working life and of service. I wish to add my voice to that. Mr. Moriarty was a great contributor to and supporter of the work of this committee. I know he had a going away lunch yesterday which I was sorry to miss. We wish him well and wish Ms Nessa Doyle well in her incoming position. It is a very important role.

**Ms Valerie Lewis:** I thank the committee for inviting ETBI to participate in this collaboration. As we are all aware, not only is the review long overdue, but it is more than opportune in light of the dramatically changing landscape of Irish and international influences, cultural shifts and public discourse since the introduction of the initial RSE programme. I note that the previous speakers have made reference to many of the points I had intended to cover. There are a few that will bear repetition, however.

We cannot underestimate the role of parents as the primary educators and their partnership with schools. While the RSE programme guidelines have acknowledged and supported the inclusion of parent partnership to date, it is particularly important that this partnership remains at the heart of any review and updating process. The current RSE programme sits formally and appropriately as part of the SPHE curriculum, and often permeates throughout the school environment. Indeed, the school culture and atmosphere often create the most supportive environment for these necessary conversations to continue. The original guidelines highlight the lived experience and also the value of witnessed healthy behaviours in everyday life. However, these lived experiences and relationships are not ring-fenced inside the school environment, but continue in social and family contexts. It is therefore vital that the parents and guardians are not only at the heart of any updated RSE programme, but work with the education partners to replicate the ‘lived experiences and healthy behaviours’ we consider so important.

The committee will note that our submission does not outline or refer to a large amount of specific content. This is not without due consideration; in fact, most of the existing overarching content is still relevant. However, we believe that, given the nature of the programme in hand and the range of experiences of all the stakeholders, students, parents, educators, experts and policymakers, content will not necessarily be the bigger challenge. While the content will determine what we say, we believe it is through the process and interactions, specifically with students, that we have the most likely opportunity for more success. We cannot, and should not, support new approaches in self-directed learning in the formal curriculum, without also mirroring these experiences throughout the school environment. Engaging with the real world means moving beyond the traditional classroom to the corridors, the canteen, the sports field, community and the home, and using the skills, information and substance gleaned in the formal space to navigate the informal.

Change is inevitable. The rate of change, particularly in culture and communication, since the introduction of the first RSE programme has been phenomenal. Indeed, the rate of change in the environment related to and surrounding issues of gender, sexuality, consent and equality, to name but a few, has at times been rapid. There is no doubt that a review is long overdue. However, we would counsel against this urgency’s provoking the introduction of an updated curriculum which will not be fit for purpose. We have noted in our submission the essential need for appropriate and adequate training to upskill our teachers. Given the rapid and wide-ranging changes already taking place in an overcrowded curriculum, we would consider it unwise to compound these challenges with a hurried revised programme which is under-resourced.

Similarly, a whole-school approach to RSE is essential; RSE does not belong to any one teacher but must be embedded in the culture of teaching and learning and needs to belong to all teachers. In conclusion, we reiterate the need to take a considered approach to implementing a revised RSE programme, and to prioritise support for schools along that journey.

**Chairman:** I thank all the witnesses for their presentations, which were incredibly interesting. There were some common threads as well as some diverse opinions. I call Deputy Byrne.

**Deputy Thomas Byrne:** The teachers and Ms Lewis have a point in saying we should not lay it all at the door of schools. I would be interested in hearing people's views on that, particularly those of Ms Burke.

**Deputy Catherine Martin:** Who determines what is age-appropriate material? How do we make sure it is not given too late because we are so fearful of doing it too early? Mr. Browne mentioned that teachers in schools with a high implementation rate were trained in facilitating openness and confidentiality among students. Does that mean that happens in only some schools? How sporadic is the teacher training? Surely all teachers should be trained in the same way.

We have been told that RSE must be taught at senior level but in her statement Ms Burke said that her school had no RSE in two years. I do not understand that if it is compulsory at senior level.

Can the three unions tell me if there has been a survey of RSE teachers or does dissatisfaction with the training ever come up at TUI and ASTI conventions or branch meetings? I hear many references to the partnership needed and fully agree because everything in education involves a partnership between parents and teachers but how is that presented in reality? What exactly is happening or is it just something that is beautifully written into the RSE policy in schools but is not actually happening?

Perhaps Ms Leydon, Mr. Duffy or Ms Lewis could tell me how teachers are selected at second level. Is it a timetable issue such that whichever teacher is available at a given time, be they the music or maths teacher, teaches it or is it typically the religious education, RE, teacher who becomes the RSE teacher? Is there really good training for these teachers or are they thrown in at the deep end? That would not be fair to teacher or student. Does the Department support the teachers, given that so many new subjects and so many changes have been introduced?

**Senator Robbie Gallagher:** I thank all the witnesses for their challenging and thought-provoking comments. Someone said childhood is short now, which is quite depressing, and with social media it is even shorter, but that is the world we live in and we have to adapt to that. The question of who will teach the teachers is valid. Mr. Browne used the term "educating our children for life". This is a subject we may need to give more time to but not today. Do we require such a subject at second level? A lot of good work is going on across a range of sectors but there is no joined-up thinking. Some thought should be given to picking a subject that fits into second level that is not squeezed in to tick a box to say that something is being covered. The subject should have meaning, similar to English, Irish and mathematics. That could be discussed another day but I would welcome the witnesses' thoughts on it.

There is a tendency in this country, and recent events in the cervical cancer tragedy are another example, to rush to have a review and implement a policy. A few speakers said this should not be a question of ticking a box for its own sake but it is important to introduce it in a



timely manner, take our time and get things right. Teachers need to be given the time to educate themselves so they in turn can pass on that information. We should not forget about the parents. Speaking as a parent, many of us are reluctant to think our wee Johnnie or Mary has moved to the level where we have to have that conversation. We have a responsibility and need help in educating ourselves on how to handle that. As the witnesses said, this will be a joint matter. The unions have made legitimate points that deserve to be listened to. My only concern is how we fit all of this in. We need to take time to do this to make sure that we get it right.

**Chairman:** Senator O’Sullivan is a formal substitution for Senator Ruane.

**Senator Grace O’Sullivan:** That is right. I am here on behalf of Senator Lynn Ruane. I thank the witnesses for their presentations. It is great to hear the different views. I picked up on the word Ms Eboni Burke used. She said that drastic changes are needed and that we need to take a quantum leap. I understand that a review has to be done properly. Deputy Catherine Martin talked about the partnership and I will talk about the communication element. I am going right back to young people again with regard to taking them into the review process. Ms Moira Leydon referred to challenging issues. As she was speaking, I could feel the tension between the young people who really need the support, communication and partnership, and the schools and parents. All stakeholders are really recognised. I cannot emphasise enough the young people themselves. If the communication with young people is right, they will guide us in this process. As the witnesses said, the landscape is changing so fast and we live in a global system with so much information. Younger people want support and need us to communicate to help them in this regard. I hope this will be taken into consideration with regard to a review.

Does Ms Leydon think there are vested interests that might stop relationships and sexuality education, RSE, from becoming open and progressive into the new age? There is tension with people who feel inadequate and teachers who feel under-resourced and do not have the training. Is there any fear, which I sense myself, that on one hand we need to project the quantum leap but that there is an element there that will pull us back? Will Ms Leydon consider that and give us some enlightenment from her own perspective?

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** I thank the witnesses for the presentations and information. The presentation from Ms Eboni Burke and the Irish Second-Level Students’ Union is quite damning with regard to the experience of students. There is a statistical basis there to confirm the anecdotal evidence that we hear about the real inadequacies of relationships and sexuality education as actually delivered.

I have a question for both Ms Burke and the teacher unions. What is their perception of the impact of religious ethos on the delivery of RSE? Do they think that it interferes and impacts on the delivery? How does that express itself on a day-to-day basis? Does the idea that it is a difficult area where one can come into perceived conflict with the religious ethos of the school contribute to teacher discomfort?

On outside agencies being involved, do the witnesses agree that outside agencies should be regulated? If it is just handed over to outside agencies, do we need some sort of external regulation to ensure that RSE, as prescribed in the curriculum - we will hopefully have a great new curriculum at some point - is actually delivered? Specifically on the education and training board, ETB, schools do not formally have a religious ethos as I understand. In some schools, there would appear to be a religious influence of some sort. I am aware of cases where ETB schools have used the Catholic Marriage Care Service, ACCORD, which refuses to give marriage counselling to same-sex couples who are going to marry. Would the witnesses agree that



it is inappropriate for ETB schools to use ACCORD in that way? Do they think that will continue? Perhaps the Teachers' Union of Ireland, TUI, might comment on that since it operates in ETB schools.

**Chairman:** I was incredibly impressed by everybody's passion. I got a sense that every one of us in this room wants to do the right thing for our young people and to equip them in an appropriate manner to develop self-esteem and resilience relating to their sexual well-being, identity and respectful sexual behaviour, and to do so in a partnership approach with teachers, parents, students and the community, which helps to form social norms.

The committee decided in September to look at the area of the existing curriculum and to make recommendations on it because we felt that the curriculum was outdated, that society had changed so much and that the existing curriculum was not necessarily reflective on society any more, bearing in mind all of the peer pressure on students. We have to acknowledge it whether we like it or not.

When we consider the research that Ms Eboni Burke presented us with, even though we felt that the curriculum was possibly outdated and needed to be changed, the fact that over 87.5% of students said that they did not have RSE on a regular basis is concerning. I read a report a number of months ago which was undertaken in 2005. It said that, in the number of schools that delivered RSE, single-sex boys' schools definitely underdelivered. That is concerning for everybody. On that survey, I know Ms Burke said she got 780 responses in two days, which is incredible. It would be interesting to find out how the survey was done. Was it done across the country? Was there a geographical basis for it? It throws up stark figures, as does the survey from 2007 from the National Parents' Council.

I completely relate to and understand the barriers that were there with regard to the programme, the competitiveness of the curriculum and the discomfort of the majority of teachers. Many of us were students in a class where a teacher attempted to talk about this many years ago. We remember the sniggering that went on. Some of us were in the role of a teacher and tried to explain this in a sensitive way. It is a difficult issue but we have to support our teachers. We need to support parents in the same way. Whatever work we do with the teachers - I do not want to use the word "training" - in educating, supporting and resourcing them to be more comfortable, we need to do the same with the parents at the same time. We need to have more parenting classes that are run in conjunction so everybody is on the same page. I understand why there would be a sense that all teachers would have an understanding and the same training. Some pupils or students, if they have an issue, might find it easier to talk to another teacher within a school as opposed to a teacher who may be directly teaching the RSE programme. Who is best placed to undertake RSE? Should we equip all teachers to do it? There was talk about having an external person coming in, which has advantages and disadvantages. An advantage is that sometimes it is easier for the students to listen to and talk more freely to and more openly with somebody who is not a permanent member of staff. On the other hand, if there are issues down the line that a student needs to address, where would he or she go then? Those are issues I also am putting to the witnesses.

We will go back to the witnesses, if they wish to indicate, bearing in mind we stated we would finish as close to 6 p.m. as possible. It has been an interesting discussion. Certainly, we want to give the witnesses the opportunity to respond. I would ask them to do so as quickly as they can, bearing in mind that they are free to write to us on any of the questions or any aspect. If they write to the clerk to the committee, he will ensure that we all get copies of that correspondence.

**Ms Maeve McCafferty:** Irrespective of who is best placed to address RSE in schools, the important aspect with which all would be in agreement is that impartial and unbiased information should be given to children.

As for age-appropriate material, the current programme is not hugely prescriptive. In our curriculum in Ireland, we are lucky that we trust our teachers to use their professional judgment to know when is the best time. They know their class best and they have a good relationship with the children and awareness of the maturity level and their readiness at any given time. Also, to allow teachers to capitalise on what is called child-led learning, the teacher can decide where an incident might happen in any given day that it is an appropriate time to deal with this issue. It is important that the curriculum in RSE leaves some autonomy to the teacher and that we trust our teachers in that regard.

Somebody asked about surveys and research in this area. The INTO conducted its own research in 2005 and the NCCA undertook a review of the broad area of SPHE in 2008. Both of those pieces of work are outdated and there is definitely a need to go back to that and start consulting teachers, parents and all the stakeholders to get more current findings on what practices are happening in schools. One consistent finding for teachers in this area was there is serious curriculum overload. RSE is one aspect within SPHE. SPHE is the subject in the curriculum with the least amount of time. It has 30 minutes a week in primary. Teachers also have to deal with the Walk Tall and Stay Safe programmes within SPHE. In meeting the needs, the time that is assigned to it currently is a challenge as well.

Finally, on the ethos, as I highlighted earlier, there is a conflict. The current programme states that RSE policy should reflect the ethos of the school and that puts teachers in a compromising position. All teachers would value more clarity because they feel conflicted in that regard.

**Ms Áine Lynch:** We would agree on the partnership piece but there is much work to do yet in that regard. There has been much talk about the fact that the parents should be aware, and involved in the development, of the policy but we are aware that parents are not. For instance, last week, knowing I was coming here, I attended one of our county meetings that was delivering the RSE training to multiple parents in schools. There were approximately 20 parents there from different schools and not one of them knew that their school had an RSE policy and certainly nobody had been involved in developing it. Partnership is essential but we have a long way to go to get there.

While the religious ethos of the school is relevant and important, we need to go beyond that. If that went tomorrow, we still would not have this fixed. We are aware that many parents do not go to parenting courses and that their approach very much comes from how they were parented, be it an approach whereby they will never do what their parents did or one in which they will repeat what their parents did.

As long as we are talking about “the talk” or having this one-off conversation, about looking at the person coming in and how that gets followed up or about teachers being comfortable and confident, then this is still a taboo subject. When adults are feeling it is a taboo subject and we ask how do we answer that, it has to start at early years. It has to start from the earliest possible time. We concentrate on second level. If we are not having the conversation from very early on, we hear children’s questions and think that they are not old enough to know. If they are asking the question then they are old enough to have an answer of some sort to it. It is a matter of how we address those questions.

If we are letting children and young people lead the conversation then it will always be age-appropriate for them. If they have concerns, the best people to answer those concerns are those from their school and from their home rather than the Internet and the media. If children are not getting those answers from the school and the home and people who love them and care about them, they will get them from somewhere else. Age-appropriateness is determined by the level at which they ask questions.

**Chairman:** I completely agree.

**Ms Moira Leydon:** I will address Senator Grace O’Sullivan’s question. What I wanted to communicate was not so much that there are vested interests but that all of the literature shows that teachers’ confidence and capacity are key. It is not merely a matter of teaching the RSE in the dedicated 40 minutes per week but that one is dealing with perhaps bullying in a class to do with sexual identity or whatever. Every teacher needs to have quite good skills. Given that they do not have those skills and the initiative overload we have experienced in recent years in the context of austerity, which is now coming home to roost, one will get resistance. It is not that there are vested interests, which is not a nice phrase. There is resistance and in order to encourage engagement, we need to be quite proactive and put in supports.

In response to Deputy Paul Murphy, it is important the ethos question is answered. There is much anecdotal evidence that it does have an impact. It adds to the lack of confidence. It adds to the sense of people really not wanting to go there. However, like everything else, anecdotal evidence is not good enough to base policy on. I strongly recommend that when the Department and other agencies engage in reviews, we get good rather than anecdotal evidence. Anecdotal evidence is really not good enough. It gives one a flavour but it does not give one the evidence.

**Mr. David Duffy:** I thank the committee members for some excellent questions.

I agree with the Senator that sometimes, aspects of the education system being changed are governed by events. In this case, it is probably less of an issue because it has been a long time since we had a review and it is no harm to do it. However, sometimes we react in education policy based on what the last report was and I agree that does not always make the best policy. In this case, it is probably timely.

I agree that not everything should lie at the door of schools. The entire society has responsibilities here, as well as schools having responsibilities.

Deputy Catherine Martin asked how this comes to unions from RSE teachers. We have members who report to us that despite the best efforts and the intentions of the Department of Education and Skills and the relevant support agencies, sometimes it can be hard to access training. There is an issue around that, despite the best efforts of those involved.

In terms of the perception of religious ethos, it is, as my colleagues have said, difficult to separate to what extent there is empirical evidence of this happening and to what extent it is a perception, but the perception is there. We need to deal with it because the perception is there, rightly or wrongly. The TUI would not go any further on that because we are a non-denominational body.

In terms of outside agencies and whether they should be regulated, it is a hard question to answer because it looks at the context of what constitutes an outside agency and what constitutes regulation. We argue strongly that schools should be careful about what agencies or

resources they bring in but, to be honest, schools already are. We argue that were more training and more resources available from the Department of Education and Skills - we recognise the work the Department and its agencies do in this area - a time hopefully would come when outside agencies would not be necessary in the first place. We believe schools need to have the opportunity to invite in outside agencies if they feel it is appropriate but it needs to be with safeguards in place.

Deputy Catherine Martin asked a question on the selection of teachers for RSE. This depends to some extent on schools. Our view is that schools need to have some flexibility on selection. In some post-primary schools, the tutor of a particular class group will teach RSE to the group, while in other schools, a small cohort of teachers will have received extra training to deliver the programme across a range of class groups. We believe the school is best placed to do this. Moreover, not only do parents have the right to have a conscientious objection to RSE but one must also factor in that an individual teacher may also have a conscientious objection. If teachers were selected to deliver the programme at the school level, it would enable us to facilitate all of these factors.

**Mr. Geoff Browne:** The responsibilities of RSE were mentioned. Parents must take the primary role in preparing their children for RSE. However, no one goes on a course to be a parent. In my house, I often hear the statement, “Ask your father about that”, and I will often reply, “Ask your mother about it.” There is certainly a responsibility on parents. RSE is often useful and probably more beneficial for children because they are more comfortable speaking to teachers or an outside body, whoever it may be. While parents should have the primary role, they need to be assisted by the education sector.

I referred to a report on a survey carried out in 2007. I understand the report was led by the Department and was not produced by the National Parents Council Post Primary.

On the ethos in schools, the NPCPP believes parents and children should have a choice, irrespective of the ethos of a school. The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment lays down content for RSE and this should be available in all schools. How this content is taught and delivered by teachers in individual schools is a matter for school policy at local level but it must be available to all children.

**Ms Eboni Burke:** In response to a comment I made, Deputy Catherine Martin referred to the failure to provide RSE for two years. Perhaps the reason is that RSE is not an examination subject. I do not wish to make an assumption but some teachers may believe there is no obligation involved and they may, therefore, stray from teaching RSE. In my experience, RSE has been used as a study class in the period leading up to mock or Christmas examinations, especially for the leaving certificate. It seems as if allowances are made that one can override RSE education, as it were. I cannot speak of the experience of everyone I represent but if the survey is anything to go by, I am sure my experience is shared by many others.

Deputy Paul Murphy asked about our perceptions of the religious ethos of schools. Again, I cannot answer for teachers but there may be a fear. While I do not attend a school with a religious ethos, as it were, many of my peers do. From what I have learned, it is not only an issue of teachers being afraid to teach without appearing to have a conflict of interest but also that students are afraid to ask questions because they wonder what they will be able to ask before their questions are shot down in the name of religion.

We hear a great deal about teachers versus outside agencies, parents, who should make deci-

sions on these matters, how they should be regulated, etc. In my experience, teachers are the outside body. If we consider the family setting, relative to parents, the teacher will be the outside body who will teach the child this type of education. Children do not want to learn about their parents' experience with relationships and sexuality and for this reason, teachers will be the outside source. As I indicated, this should always be regulated.

The Chairman asked how the survey was conducted. It was drawn up by me and my colleague, the education officer, Craig Smith, and we conducted it online through Google Forms because we are not especially tech-savvy. In terms of geographical challenges, it was a nationwide survey which the Irish Second-Level Students' Association disseminated through its social media pages and we encouraged everyone to share it. That is probably how the responses racked up so quickly. There was no discrimination in terms of providing that only students or males could respond. It was simply an online survey.

**Ms Valerie Lewis:** To respond to the point made by Deputy Murphy on ACCORD, while I cannot speak specifically to the range and nature of schools using outside agencies, it goes to the point of discomfort that was mentioned earlier that where one has teachers, volunteers or conscripts who may not feel comfortable with the full breadth of knowledge, sometimes the tendency is to look outwards and ask who can come in and provide what is needed. One then has all that goes with that in terms of whether the person or organisation is accredited, who is available locally and can travel to a school or to various counties and who is available in the relevant period. This also directs us to a point Ms Burke made and which featured in our submission, namely, that there is no such thing as having one RSE teacher, particularly at post-primary level where one starts a conversation in a 40-minute period. Even if we are lucky to have a 40-minute period for RSE throughout the year, the conversation naturally evolves throughout the course of the day and maybe drifts into the next classroom. That is why we counsel towards having a whole-school continuing professional development, CPD, programme. We do not dismiss the co-ordinated approach. Social, personal and health education, SPHE, co-ordination and management co-ordination are necessary but we want teachers to be able to have this conversation and not to bat it back by saying it is not their role or remit. We want to have an over-and-back conversation. We would certainly support that.

The issues of timing and the urgency of the review seem to be raising their head. I reiterate that we should not rush matters as to do so would be a little like trying to build a bicycle while still cycling. We need to keep the current RSE programme in place while we reinvent it. We should not call a halt to the current approach but take time to ensure we get it right.

**Chairman:** I thank all the witnesses for their time and valuable contributions. We all agree that parents should be the primary educator of their children in matters of relationships and sexuality. Sometimes, however, they unfairly abdicate responsibility for this type of education to teachers and schools. The onus is then on schools to pick up the slack to avoid children learning behaviours that are inappropriate or disrespectful through the media and Internet.

This is the first of three stakeholder sessions. We received 54 submissions when we advertised for expressions of interest and we broke these down into three different areas. This session has focused on the effectiveness of the current model from the point of view of parents, teachers and students. The next session will focus on elements to be considered in a future model, the changes required, limitations, etc. The final session will focus on implementation and consider best practice, potential solutions, Departments, agencies, etc. At that point, we hope to be in a position to issue recommendations to the Department. The witnesses have made a valuable contribution and we will be pleased to accept any further submissions they have on the basis of

JES

today's discussion. I thank members for their attendance.

The joint committee adjourned at 6.10 p.m. until 10.a.m. on Thursday, 3 May 2018.