

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COMHCHOISTE UM OIDEACHAS AGUS SCILEANNA

JOINT COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND SKILLS

Déardaoin, 18 Deireadh Fómhair 2018

Thursday, 18 October 2018

The Joint Committee met at 10.30 a.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT:

Deputy Thomas Byrne,	Senator Maria Byrne.
Deputy Catherine Martin,	
Deputy Tony McLoughlin,	
Deputy Hildegarde Naughton,	

DEPUTY FIONA O'LOUGHLIN IN THE CHAIR.

Business of Joint Committee

Chairman: I remind members to turn off their mobile phones. Apologies have been received from Senators Paul Gavan, Lynn Ruane and Robbie Gallagher. I expect everyone else to be here. It is proposed that we conduct our public business with the Minister, Deputy McHugh, first and then go into private session afterwards to deal with housekeeping matters. Is that agreed? Agreed.

Report on Positive Mental Health in Schools: Minister for Education and Skills

Chairman: In September 2017, this committee launched its report on positive mental health in schools and we made 18 recommendations to the Minister at that time with regard to the need to ensure supports are in place for our students, schools, communities and teachers, to help them to deal with the day to day challenges that they face on an ongoing basis and to assist school communities in coping with mental health issues when they arise. We agreed at that point that we would like to have further engagement with the Minister on the implementation of the recommendations that we put in place at that point which are contained in our report. On behalf of the committee, I welcome the Minister, Deputy McHugh, and his officials. I wish him well with his new responsibilities. On Saturday, when we heard that he was appointed to this position, we all wanted to wish him well and to offer him positive engagement with this committee. There are times when we need to call the Minister of the day to account and I know he would expect and appreciate that but we assure him of our support in working together to achieve positive changes within the education and skills system.

The format of this part of the meeting is that I will invite the Minister to make his statement for which I thank him. We received it before the meeting. We will have engagement with members of the committee following that.

Before we begin, I remind members of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect that they should not comment on, criticise, or make charges against a person outside the House or any official either by name or in such a way as to make him or her identifiable. I call the Minister to make his opening statement.

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): I thank the Chair and committee for the invitation. I acknowledge that they are reaching out and want an inclusive approach here. That is the language that I was speaking to my officials with yesterday. I see a role for this committee. The work and report it has done on positive mental health and well-being and the committee's suggestions are of critical importance. I will be looking at a 2019 plan and I would like this committee to be part of that plan, front and centre, for 2019. At a wider level, we will be looking at a three-year education plan and I would like the space and time at this committee to see how we can work together on that. We have cross-party representation and Independents here. They all have their own experiences, having been together as a committee and working on education matters for longer than I have. I have been thrown into the job in the last 48 hours. I spent yesterday trying to familiarise myself with a wide range of policy. At 10 p.m. last night, my head was about to explode and I had to stop. My take away from my first day on the job yesterday is this. I was a secondary school teacher in 1993 and the world of education is different now. I acknowledge everybody involved in the education sector, the teachers and the creative work that has been done. I will get a chance to talk about that on a wider level later.

Ba mhaith liom mo bhuíochas a ghlacadh leis an gCathaoirleach agus le baill an Chomhchoiste um Oideachas agus Scileanna de bharr na suime atá léirithe acu maidir le cothú na folláine agus na meabhairshláinte dearfaí sa chóras scoile. Ba mhaith liom fosta mo bhuíochas a ghlacadh leis an gcoiste as ucht an chuiridh labhairt anseo inniu. Tá mé sásta go raibh an deis seo agam an t-eolas is deireanaí a roinnt maidir leis an dul chun cinn atá déanta ag mo Roinn i dtaobh na moltaí a cuireadh chun cinn sa tuarascáil Positive Mental Health in Schools.

I thank the Chair and members of the Joint Committee on Education and Skills for the interest they have shown in the area of well-being promotion and positive mental health in our schools and for their invitation to attend today to update the committee on the progress being made by my Department in implementing the recommendations made in the committee's 2017 report on Positive Mental Health in Schools. My statement today will primarily address the role of the Department of Education and Skills in the promotion of well-being and positive mental health; the well-being policy statement and framework for practice 2018-2023; and progress made on the recommendations of the joint committee's report on positive mental health in schools.

The promotion of well-being is an essential element of the ambition of the Department of Education and Skills to achieve the best education and training system in Europe by 2026. Schools and centres for education are crucial to the ongoing development of our children and young people's well-being and we are fortunate to have schools already doing so much to enhance children and young people's knowledge and skills in this area. The Department of Education and Skills has a key role to play in the promotion of the well-being of children and young people in Ireland, in collaboration with the Departments of Health and Children and Youth Affairs, and with other Departments and agencies. The promotion of well-being in the education community is a priority for the Department of Education and Skills.

My Department adopts a holistic and integrated approach to supporting schools in promoting well-being and positive mental health. The process spans the curriculum in schools, whole-school ethos, quality of teaching, learning and assessment, student support and pastoral care and the provision of professional development for teachers. It also involves other supports such as educational psychological services and guidance services and the interface with other agencies, both nationally and locally. The action plan for education for 2016 to 2019 from the Department of Education and Skills set out a number of objectives and proposed actions specifically targeting the promotion of well-being and positive mental health in our school communities. These actions build upon and complement well-being promoting measures that have already been put in place. They include improved curriculum content, including the introduction of the junior cycle well-being programme; more training for teachers and school staff, including the roll-out of evidence based programmes to promote social and emotional competence, resilience and school connectedness; the introduction of best practice models of school based student support teams; an increase in the number of NEPS psychologists; and the restoration of guidance posts.

Key among the objectives within the Action Plan for Education 2018 was the publication of the Department's Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice 2018-2023, which was launched in July 2018, providing an overarching structure encompassing existing, ongoing and developing work in the area of well-being promotion. The Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice 2018-2023 sets out the ambition and vision of the Department of Education and Skills that, by 2023, the promotion of well-being will be at the core of the ethos of every school and centre for education in Ireland, that all schools will provide evidence-in-

formed approaches and support, appropriate to need, to promote the well-being of their students and that Ireland will be recognised as a leader in this area.

The well-being policy statement and framework for practice describes how schools can best promote well-being. In practice, such schools are those that recognise the importance of well-being promotion, where the voices of children and young people are heard, and where they experience a sense of belonging and feel safe, connected and supported. They are schools which provide children and young people with positive experiences, high-quality teaching and learning, and in which approaches to well-being are developed, implemented and self-evaluated. Furthermore, they are schools that can signpost students and their parents to internal and external pathways to support, as needed.

The well-being policy statement sets out the evidence base for best practice in regard to school well-being promotion, which indicates that schools should adopt a whole-school, multi-component, preventative approach to well-being promotion that includes both universal and targeted interventions. A whole-school approach involves all in the school community engaging in a collaborative process to improve areas of school life that impact on well-being. This will be achieved through the use of a school self-evaluation process taking well-being promotion as its focus. It will allow schools to benchmark their practice against indicators of success and statements of effective practice, and identify areas for development, implementation and review. It is envisaged that schools will engage with the statements and adapt and develop the best practice items as they meet the needs in their own school community.

A multi-component approach encourages schools to address areas, not only relating to teaching and learning, but also relating to other essential elements of well-being promotion, including school culture and environment, policy and planning, and relationships and partnerships. Working preventatively and providing for both universal and targeted approaches is described as providing a “continuum of support”. Schools are encouraged to provide supports to promote the well-being of all within the school community, as well as providing some targeted interventions for children and young people presenting with vulnerabilities in the area of well-being. These areas are embedded in the well-being framework for practice.

It is my Department’s aim that, by 2023, all schools and centres for education will have embedded this dynamic school self-evaluation process focusing on well-being promotion. The implementation of this well-being promotion process is an ongoing process that will ensure the necessary focus on supporting children and young people in having a sense of purpose and fulfilment, and the skills necessary to deal with life’s challenges. Schools will be supported in this work by a comprehensive national professional development programme currently being developed and trialled, and a full national roll-out will commence in 2019 and run to 2023. This will include facilitating the engagement of schools in the school self-evaluation for well-being promotion process, which will build professional capacity.

The implementation plan for this policy also sets goals to promote the well-being of teachers and to address the learning needs of current and future teachers in regard to well-being promotion. Work is under way to map the range of existing supports that schools can already access through the Professional Development Service for Teachers, PDST, health and well-being team, the Junior Cycle for Teachers service and NEPS, with a view to ensuring there is a comprehensive and easily accessible set of resources to address school-identified well-being promotion needs. There is also a plan to develop a research based framework for the evaluation of well-being promotion in schools. A well-being policy implementation group is in place which will co-ordinate activity with other Departments. This group will link with the Pathfind-

er project structures when progressed. The Department collaborates in the implementation of Healthy Ireland 2013-2025, the Connecting for Life strategy 2015-2020 and Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures 2014-2020.

The well-being policy statement and framework for practice has incorporated some of the key recommendations of this committee's report on positive mental health in schools. I thank all the committee members for their work and input in that regard. Key recommendations in regard to the whole-school approach, the importance of listening and of feeling a sense of belonging, and connectedness to school are highlighted as areas to target in school well-being promotion. The implementation plan recognises the need, and plans to provide for additional teacher training and the development of more resources for schools. The needs of children and young people with well-being vulnerabilities are also recognised, and actions that require co-operation between the Department of Education and Skills and other Departments and agencies, including the Department of Health, the HSE, the Department of Children and Youth Affairs and Tusla are included in the implementation plan. My Department will continue to work closely with other Departments and stakeholders to ensure an aligned approach and a continuum of services is provided to promote the positive mental health and well-being of all of our children and young people.

Ba mhaith liom mo bhuíochas a ghlacadh leis an gcoiste as ucht an cuiridh an doiciméid seo a chur ina láthair agus páirt a glacadh sa phlé. Tá mé breá sásta aon cheist atá ag baill an choiste a fhreagairt. Once again, I thank the committee for the invitation. I am happy to take any questions members may have.

Chairman: I thank the Minister. I call Deputy Catherine Martin.

Deputy Catherine Martin: Guím gach rath ar an Aire ina ról nua. Tá súil agam go dtuigeann sé go bhfuil infheistíocht, seachas costais, i gceist leis an oideachas. Tá súil agam freisin go n-aithníonn an tAire, mar iarmhúinteoir, luach ár múinteoirí atá ag mothú éadóchasach faoi láthair. I wish the Minister of State well and offer my congratulations on his appointment to his new role. As I said, I hope he sees education as the investment it truly is; it needs to stop being seen as a cost. As a former teacher, I hope he sees how demoralised our teaching profession is and that he places a value on teachers.

I welcome the well-being policy statement and framework. However, I note the section that deals with the progress on the recommendations of the joint committee's report on positive mental health is the smallest section, which is disappointing over a year later. A key point that resonated with me, as a former teacher, and the reason we as a committee prioritised this, is that it is essential we give our children the toolbox of skills to cope at a time of crisis. Our young people's sense of well-being is so fragile that it shatters at the first crisis.

With regard to guidance counselling, I ask that we would investigate the introduction of school based counselling, which is being done in the US, Canada and Australia. Has research been done in the Department in this regard, given it is now over a year later? Prevention and early intervention are key when it comes to our children. It is about how we hold onto our mental wellness. It is vital we make sure we do this as early as possible, so we need to be talking about the primary school level.

In his statement, the Minister of State referred to the increase in the number of NEPS psychologists. The Committee on the Future of Mental Health Care launched its final report yesterday. Something that came out of it was that we only have 179 NEPS psychologists but we have

4,000 schools. We were told another 18 were to be added this year but it seems some of those psychologists must be struggling under the burden of working with so many schools. I do not know how they can provide the service that is needed. Is it true there is no real maternity cover? Is it the case that if a NEPS psychologist goes on maternity leave, there is no cover whereby someone steps in? If that is true, it needs to be addressed. If someone is covering six, seven, eight, nine or ten schools and then goes on maternity leave, and there is no one to step in, that is a crucial resource that is missing from our schools.

With regard to teachers, the witnesses who contributed to the report talked about the need to look after the well-being of our teachers. If we want teachers to look after students then they need training in mental wellness. Some of the witnesses mentioned that teachers feel the challenges they face in work threatens their mental well-being. Indeed, Dr. Tony Bates, paid particular attention to the important role that teachers play in schools. He said that they were the “carriers of change” but warned that too much is often expected of them and it is presumed that they are capable of solving all of society’s problems within the classroom.

In 2016, I was elected a Deputy but before that I was a teacher for 20 years and taught in three different schools. In all my years teaching I received only one hour of inservice training on mental wellness for a teacher. There is something very wrong with that situation. It was potluck that one of my schools thought that teachers would benefit from inservice training on wellness. I hope that the new Minister views such a situation as wrong and something that needs to be improved. It should be policy that teachers receive inservice training on mental wellness. It is not good enough to just get one hour in 20 years. Such a situation also does a disservice to students.

Finally, I do not know if the Minister is aware that the Chairman, Deputy O’Loughlin, and I have been working on a mindfulness initiative for everyone who works in Leinster House. It is important that we, as politicians, show the lead in this matter. If we look after our own mental health it will ensure that we are better public representatives and thus look after the staff who work here in Leinster House. A mindfulness programme has worked very successfully in Westminster. Last week, Mr. Chris Ruane, a Labour MP, was in Leinster House. Last year, I travelled to Westminster where he held a very successful international conference on mindfulness. The former Minister, Deputy Richard Bruton, attended the mindfulness seminar held in Leinster House last week. I hope that the new Minister will lend his support to promoting the initiative. It is important that when we roll out the programme, and I do not know whether the Chair will agree, that Cabinet Members participate. If we truly view well-being as crucial in the education sector then I would appreciate if the new Minister gave his time or was seen to publicly support the initiative that we are about to roll out in Leinster House.

Chairman: I chaired the session on mindfulness last week and the former Minister, Deputy Bruton, was in attendance.

Deputy Catherine Martin: Yes.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: I welcome an tAire, Deputy McHugh to his new role. It is a great honour for him to be appointed Minister for Education and Skills. I will not tackle him on the difficult issues today. He is entitled to get a bit of space to familiarise himself with the issues. I am sure that he got a ministerial brief. I would be grateful if that could be provided to members of the committee, as is standard. We hope that we do not have to submit an application for it under freedom of information legislation. A ministerial brief has been provided before on two occasions by the former Minister, Deputy Bruton, and by the Minister of State at the

Department of Education and Skills, Deputy Mitchell O'Connor, respectively. I look forward to receiving the brief and ask that the new Minister arranges for that.

I wish to make an observation but one that does not relate to the new Minister as he only took over the job this week. I have concerns about well-being in general. It is good that there is a focus on well-being. From my own observations, schools have run with the idea and have tried hard to focus on both the well-being of students and teachers with limited resources.

I wish to take the Department up on a number of points. The restoration of guidance counsellor posts has been highlighted as one of the key areas the Department has progressed as part of its well-being policy. The truth is that despite guidance counsellor posts being a condition of the confidence and supply agreement, there was massive resistance by the Department in the shape of bureaucracy to restoring guidance counselling. I want to let the new Minister know that the Department has been entirely hypocritical by boasting about the restoration of guidance counselling when not only was it forced on them by Fianna Fáil as part of the confidence and supply agreement but, subsequently, we had to fight at a number of budgets to ensure the initiative was implemented. Certain forces within the Department did not value guidance counselling and, shockingly, one person even asked me: "Are these the right people that we need dealing with our children?" That is exactly what I was asked by one person who works in the Department. My party is glad to see the restoration of guidance counselling. I urge the new Minister to make sure that the people within his Department who opposed guidance counselling do not succeed under his watch. I ask him to keep as close an eye on this issue as was kept by Fianna Fáil. Certainly, one part of the Department had the perception that guidance was about ferrying people into work, the business world, work experience, etc. Such work is part of guidance counselling but is not all of it.

I welcome the fact that the Minister mentioned a well-being policy in his statement, which I hope means the entire Department has changed its approach to guidance counselling. I believe that the people in the Department who do not value guidance counselling, and increased bureaucracy, will try all sorts of moves at various points to undo the work that has been done.

Why is the allocation of psychologists as part of the National Educational Psychological Service, NEPS, seen as a major focus of the well-being policy? The truth is that NEPS psychologists have existed since the service was started and long before well-being was a buzzword or theme. The psychologists do not, in general, go into schools and provide therapy or teach well-being. Their role is to diagnose and assess the educational and psychological needs of students. A lack of NEPS psychologists has contributed massively to a lack of well-being among certain students who are then unable to get the correct resources or services that they need. NEPS psychologists do go into schools and give assistance at times of crisis but they do not treat or counsel children. As Deputy Catherine Martin mentioned, NEPS is not to be confused with a counselling service. NEPS is very important but it is not a counselling service, and it does not directly help with maintaining the mental health of young people. It is a misnomer for NEPS to be a major focus of the well-being policy and I have noticed that development creep in since the budget. In my view, NEPS is a separate and extremely important service. I would love the new Minister to focus on the service because there is an insufficient number of NEPS psychologists, which has resulted in a significant waiting list. I know that there is a focus on ways to move away from assessment but there will always be a need for educational psychologists. As Deputy Catherine Martin has said, we will have to consider a system of educational counselling based in schools.

I urge the Minister to consider providing nurses in schools thus contributing to enhanced

well-being in schools. The creation of such posts has been recommended in the recent report on special needs assistants, SNAs, produced by the National Council for Special Education. It recommended that a small number of nurses in schools could help a significant number of students. It is important that the Minister considers the idea.

My other concern about well-being has been slightly dissipated. I acknowledge that the Department has given greater structure to its well-being initiative. When well-being was first introduced in schools there was very little structure and it was more of a buzzword and a collective of things that already existed. There are extra hours, etc. but there are only so many hours in the day and only so many things that schools can do. Therefore, we need to ensure that the well-being policy is utterly focused and structures.

I want to talk about the type of organisations allowed into schools and I want to Minister on the issue. For key debates such as sex education, various individuals and organisations from a wide range of areas are invited into schools. I tabled a parliamentary question on the issue and it looks like the area is unregulated whether it is sporting bodies, sex education providers, mindfulness providers or yoga teachers. I would love to see a code of practice introduced on who is allowed to go into schools because I firmly believe that a board or a principal will make a simple mistake and allow someone into a school who has no business being involved in the education of our children.

I wish the Minister the best in his new position. It would be unfair for anyone to ask him to go into details today but this meeting is a good opportunity for us to convey our views to him. As the Minister responsible for education, I do not think he should stand for a situation where all responsibilities are thrown at schools and teachers. It should not be the case that when there is a problem with the mental health of children that schools must do something about it. Yes, they can do a lot about the issue but what about the mental health services, the health service, society as a whole, families, Tusla and the Department of Children and Youth Affairs? There are a range of areas that have responsibility. I urge the Minister for Education and Skills, without being cruel or trying to dodge his duties, to ensure that all of the Departments adopt a collaborative approach. The child and adolescent mental health services, CAMHS, operates under the remit of the Department of Health. I want the Minister for Education and Skills to ensure that when a child needs a service provided by CAMHS that it is the Department of Health that provides it. A well-being policy is fantastic but it is not going to help a child with mental health issues, and there are many such children, who need hospital-based treatment. Frighteningly, there are primary school children who need long-term hospital treatment but that is not a matter for the Department of Education and Skills. As policy makers, we must keep the focus on the range of Departments which have responsibility for mental health. There is too much of an attitude in this country that schools can be left to deal with the mental health of children and that that will solve all of our problems. The Minister knows that is not the case. I urge caution and that the Department of Education and Skills not take responsibility for everything relating to the mental health of children. I wish the Minister the best of luck in his new role.

Deputy Hildegard Naughton: I congratulate the Minister on his appointment. I know he will bring his experience as a teacher to the role, which will be very valuable. Members of the committee are looking forward to working with him in a constructive way. This consideration of the action plan for education gives us an opportunity to feed into the plan, which is critical.

We are considering the area of well-being. It is a commonly used word for which people have different definitions. We need to take a holistic approach on the issue. I agree with Deputy Byrne that much of it relates to the schools education system. I am from a primary school

teaching background. Ultimately, this issue goes back to education. We need to give our children a very good start in life in terms of mental health and well-being, whatever the definition of that may be.

On well-being and empathy, one may score ten for well-being on a scale of zero to ten but not very high for empathy. One may be feeling very good and have great self confidence and belief in oneself but empathy is one's ability to understand and share the feelings of others. It is proven that a high level of empathy not only relates to academic performance but also indicates that one is a well rounded person and can empathise with others. That should be considered not only as it relates to children but also across society on issues such as social media, bullying and relationship and sexual education, on which this committee has done a significant amount of work. One can teach empathy but one must begin doing so at a very young age. That must be taken on board in terms of how it is introduced through education. Pilot schemes are taking place across the country in that regard and much good work is being done.

Reference was made to outside groups coming into schools. They are doing so because there is a void in many communities and primary and secondary schools which are crying out for help and assistance in that regard. That needs to be monitored to ensure that the correct people are going into our schools. It is the responsibility of school principals to vet such people. Obviously, the Department should have a role in that regard. That issue arose during committee discussion of relationship and sexuality education and how it should be taught in schools taking into account ethos, different cultures and the diversity in our society. We now have a more complex society than we did when members were going to school.

On teachers and leadership within schools, it is of great importance for teachers to receive such training through the teacher training colleges. When I was going through teacher training more than ten years ago there was no reference to the well-being of teachers or pupils, mental health or how to deal with such issues. Teachers are fantastic and have great instincts and can see issues which arise in their class as they deal with the young people all the time. However, we need to give teachers the extra tools they need to be able to respond to a particular crisis or a concern they may have regarding their pupils.

I have only been a member of the committee for a couple of months and did not contribute to its report on positive mental health in schools. There is reference in the report to the recognition of non-academic achievements, which is very important. The arts are a great tool for exploring emotions and difficulties that may arise within a school without having to directly deal with or pinpoint particular issues with students. It provides an opportunity for such issues to be explored as a school community. There are many innovative ways to deal with mental health and well-being and we should consider best practice in this area. These issues relate to the staff of schools as well as pupils. Just because one teaches English, history or maths does not mean that one does not deal with well-being. A cross-school and cross-community approach to the issue is needed. We all have memories of school teachers who had a great influence on us and that often results from kindness and understanding and a teacher reaching out. Such behaviour comes from the culture within a school and that is created by the school management. There is only so much that the Department and the Government can do. This is about what is happening in a local community. There need to be and are leaders within communities who are doing great work behind the scenes and in the best interests of their students.

Education is a key factor in this issue and we need to begin to address it when children are at a very young age. The culture needs to start in our teacher training colleges in terms of training our teachers and then providing the resources when they begin teaching.

Senator Maria Byrne: I welcome the Minister and thank him for his attendance. I wish him all the best in his new role. I know how committed he is to it. His very good opening statement addressed the importance of working together.

The report of the committee addressed well-being and mental health and a significant amount of work was done by its members in that regard. A primary school in Moyross, County Limerick, was one of the first primary schools in the country to bring well-being and mindfulness into the classroom. It set an example in that regard and was covered on RTÉ and the Six One News, etc. Such work should begin at a very young age because when one is happy at a younger age it continues through one's education and stays with the child for the rest of his or her days.

There are many recommendations in the report and I am sure the Minister has not had time to digest them all. The most important aspects are inclusiveness and working together. Most schools now have policies on bullying, well-being and mindfulness and send teachers on related training courses, but it is important that it be right across the board in terms of students also. Students in some areas may not have access to a psychologist, which is a very important service to address issues which may arise. Career guidance teachers are often trained in different spheres and it is very important to have such training in place for all teachers in order that they be able to break down barriers, speak to their students and deal with the issues of the day.

I welcome the commitment of the Minister to engage and work with the committee on an ongoing basis.

Deputy Tony McLoughlin: I welcome the Minister, Deputy McHugh. I have worked with him very closely in recent years and have no doubt that he will be a success. I wish him very well because I have seen his enthusiasm for any job he has taken on and his willingness to communicate. It is vitally important for the committee that the Minister will listen and is a good communicator. We will have a good working relationship with him. He has demonstrated his energy on the job that he and I shared for many years. I offer my congratulations to him and his staff, etc. on his promotion.

The report proposes that its recommendations would be implemented across the country by 2023. As a member of the Committee on the Future of Mental Health Care, I recognise the vitally importance of this committee highlighting the issues of positive mental health. I have seen it first hand. Our report was launched yesterday and, on numerous occasions, we had long discussions in relation to young people and their fears and concerns. It is vitally important that this is rolled out as quickly as possible, for the well-being of students, young children and their parents and teachers alike, and I know the Minister will take this onboard. The Minister has an educational background and will be aware of that in Donegal and all over the country.

I have other questions, but there will be another day to ask the Minister those.

Chairman: I will make a few points and pose a few questions before I hand back to the Minister.

Distinguishing between mental illness and mental health is important. There are students within the system who need access to NEPS and CAMHS and, all too often, they are being let down by the system and it is something that we have explored within this committee and the Committee on Future of Mental Health Care. That is a separate plea in itself.

In this report, we chose to focus mainly on the promotion of positive mental health among the school community, including teachers and other staff, as well as students. That must be to

the benefit of community at large, there is no doubt about that.

The committee made 18 recommendations. There is reference in the Minister's statement to the fact that the well-being policy statement and framework for practice has incorporated some of the key recommendations. Reading through it this morning, there is no reference to the committee whatsoever, either in the body of the document or the reference points on it. As was mentioned, the committee put a lot of work into this. The recommendations were made a year ago and it is disappointing not to see it referenced. As the Minister will appreciate, I had a short time to go through the report, so I am open to correction on that point, but I cannot see it.

I accept the positive statements that have been made and acknowledge that the committee's first recommendation has been taken up about having a whole-school approach. That is hugely important. The Minister stated that schools are encouraged to provide supports. That is welcome, but there are pressures on principals and staff in schools that must be acknowledged, including delivery of subjects, trying to promote a positive approach to life, discipline and all of the bureaucracy. The schools want the support of the committee and the Department. The Department has a key role in providing those supports.

One of the committee's key recommendations was that each school needed a strategy and that should be written down. The committee feels that is hugely important and is a recommendation that needs to be made.

Another of the committee's recommendations was for the Minister for Education and Skills to meet with the Minister of State with special responsibility for mental health and older people. I do not know whether that happened when Deputy Bruton was the Minister for Education and Skills. I ask that the new Minister might consider, in the future, having a collaborative approach with the Minister of State with special responsibility for mental health and older people and the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs because the interaction with Tusla is hugely important. If needs be, I am sure it would be possible for the chairpersons of the respective committees to come together and have an interactive collaboration.

I would appreciate, in either a further engagement or a written document, that the committee would see reference to each of its 18 recommendations. They are specific and we need more specifics in the report that we have received. Deputy Naughton mentioned the recommendation that the committee made about the present emphasis on academic achievement. We do not want to take away from our young people needing to excel in academics, but it is important to recognise non-academic achievements. Peter Hussey, who was one of the stakeholders at a previous engagement, spoke about interactive youth and community theatre and how interaction can support resilience within young people. The committee felt that was an incredibly strong point and very well put.

The establishment of an expert group to investigate the appropriateness, feasibility and best practice approach was a recommendation the committee made and would like to see implemented, to have timelines for that and the introduction of the school-based counselling.

The Minister referenced the three-year plan and that the work would be supported by a comprehensive, national professional development programme which is currently being developed and trialled. The committee would like to have more information about that and engagement with those who were involved. If a pilot scheme has been done, it would be useful for the committee to engage with that before there is a full national roll-out in 2019. It is welcome, and the committee appreciates it.

We can all be well-meaning in our intentions but having evaluation of implementation is important. We would need to see that.

I will go back to the Minister now and, as I say, we are conscious that he is only in this role 48 hours and we do not expect him to have all the answers. Please feel free to come back to the committee afterwards on some of the issues we have raised and we will ensure that all of the members receive that.

Deputy Joe McHugh: I thank the Chairperson and the members for their contributions and their approach on my first day at committee. Engagement is important and I am accountable for a large budget of nearly €10.8 billion. I know the honeymoon period will not last long, but I look forward to that as well because dialogue-----

Deputy Thomas Byrne: I will not ask priority question No. 1 this afternoon if the Minister is waiting for that one.

Deputy Joe McHugh: Did the Deputy not say for the whole day? Was it just the morning?

I will go through each person's contribution, if that is okay.

Chairman: Of course.

Deputy Joe McHugh: If there are areas where more information is needed, we can get back to the committee directly.

Deputy Martin said education is an investment and not a cost. Education is wider, broader and different. The old Irish word "oideachas" suggests it is about the second family and parents entrusting their young people with the second family, whether it is in naíonraí, primary school, secondary school or university. I am happy to work with the committee on that.

On the Deputy's point about the paragraph on the recommendations, I have a full copy here that I was given as a brief yesterday. There were 18 to 20 recommendations that the committee made. I have a brief on that which I am happy to circulate to the committee.

Chairman: Thank you.

Deputy Joe McHugh: Everybody will have a copy.

Has school-based counselling been tried and tested? A lot of work has been done on the well-being policy as it relates to the Australian model but also in relation to mental wellness at primary school level. I am in total agreement that it has to start at early stages for young people when they are entering a different world and there is an overload of information and they are dealing with all sorts of anxiety challenges. I agree with the committee.

There was a commitment in the programme for partnership Government for 65 NEPS psychologists. We are up to 31, so we are not there yet. The Deputy also asked about maternity cover and maternity leave. If there are critical incidents and they are needed for support when somebody is on maternity leave then that will be provided. There is a National Educational Psychological Service, NEPS, psychologist to respond to queries and there is access to NEPS support and development work. There is no panel as far as I am aware but it is something that we need to work towards and I am happy to do that.

On looking after teachers, the text messages have already come in with anecdotal advice and

information but I am getting a sense that there is information fatigue or initiative overload-----

Deputy Thomas Byrne: Just let them teach.

Deputy Joe McHugh: I am getting that feedback and as I step into my brief I will get more feedback. I am meeting the National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals, NAPD, tomorrow and I will continue that intensive engagement for the short to medium term. That is why I want to look at the 2019 preparation and work with the committee on a 2019 plan and a three year plan to see what is working and what is not working in the action plan and to see what its strengths and weaknesses are. I know that at the centre of all teaching is caring and kindness as different contributors pointed out today. I am conscious of the well-being of teachers as well and it is something that I want to work closely on. I do not want to talk about my experiences as a teacher as it was a long time ago. Everybody has their own anecdotal evidence. Deputy Catherine Martin worked as a teacher for 20 years and the experiential learning we have will hopefully be helpful and constructive as we approach our dialogue.

One hour on mental wellness-----

Deputy Catherine Martin: In 20 years.

Deputy Joe McHugh: In fairness there has been a massive drive on mental health in this current Parliament over the past two and a half years, not just because Deputy Catherine Martin came here, but because of the significance of what is happening with this new type of politics. As somebody who has been in the position of Chief Whip, the consensus approach where I engaged with the likes of Deputies Mattie McGrath, Ó Snodaigh and Michael Moynihan was one where we had to get consensus every week and I want to bring that type of approach and philosophy to the work that we are trying to do here as well. I do not have a monopoly on wisdom on what the Deputy's approach is but I am all ears and the communication line is really important.

On how we treat each other, I know Chris Ruane, MP from my days in the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly days as well. He is a good Liverpudlian and a good person and I am happy to work on any initiative within the Oireachtas here.

Deputy Catherine Martin: Good.

Deputy Joe McHugh: We are leaders and that leadership is in a public manner. This committee is being broadcast live today. People could be in their kitchens today watching. It could be a mother or father whose children are at school or it could be a child who is not at school today listening to this so how we engage with each other and treat each other - the word "respect" was used - is all important in our leadership role and position. Day to day politics needs to be done as well but if there is a mindfulness initiative here I am certainly happy to be a part of that if I am invited and I will be happy to offer any support that I can give.

Deputy Catherine Martin: I thank the Minister. I apologise but I must leave to attend a meeting with the Ceann Comhairle on the mindfulness initiative. I might ask a question and then I have to dash but I will check the answer later. On the counselling that has been tried and tested, we are not talking about career counselling but specifically counselling. I would love to know how it is being tried and tested, what schools in Ireland it was done in and how it compared to Australia and Canada. As Deputy Thomas Byrne said, there is a myth out there that the NEPS staff are almost like counsellors in that they come into schools and do one-to-one counselling but that is certainly not their job and that is certainly not happening so I would like to know exactly how and where it was tried and tested and how it compared internationally.

Deputy Joe McHugh: I am happy to forward that information to the Deputy and as final point before the Deputy leaves, whether one is a physics teacher or a French teacher one also has the mindfulness responsibility. The teachers do that really well and it is a whole-school approach which was the Deputy's number one priority coming to this committee. I do not know if her priorities were outlined chronologically but the whole-school approach was the first priority. We have to acknowledge the fact that a lot of the mindfulness, caring and child-centred approaches are already being carried out by teachers. I take the Deputy's point and I will get that information to her.

Deputy Catherine Martin: I thank the Minister.

Deputy Joe McHugh: I look forward to working with Deputy Thomas Byrne and I refer to his questions around guidance counselling. He raised the issue of responsibility for counselling. This goes back to the collaborative suggestion that the Chairman was making. The responsibility for the provision of mental health services and counselling for young people lies with the Department of Health and the Health Service Executive but we have to reach out, whether that is with Tusla or the HSE. I am happy to work with the Deputy on that and if it means bringing the three committees and the three chairmen together along with the Ministers responsible then we have to drive that collaborative approach and I know that was key in the recommendations.

The measures announced by the Department over the course of budgets 2016, 2017 and 2018 mean that 500 guidance posts, or two thirds of the guidance allocation that was withdrawn in budget 2012 has been restored to schools from September 2018. I thank the Deputy for his own personal contribution to ensuring that this happened. These 500 posts are allocated separately and transparently and outside of the quote on the normal schedule of posts, there is an obligation on schools to ensure that these hours are used for guidance activities. Schools can decide to allocate more hours to guidance than the amount allocated on the schedule. They cannot allocate fewer hours and a guidance plan will outline the school's approach to guidance generally in how students can be supported and assisted in making choices and successful transitions in their personal and social education and in career areas. I am interested in the Deputy's point about how the role changes and on the evolving nature of the challenges that we have.

The Deputy also mentioned NEPS and NEPS psychologists and I referenced that already.

On the code of practice for people and different groups coming in, a new circular was issued in July to update schools on what is appropriate in terms of using external providers and programmes so that can be used as part of a whole school-----

Deputy Thomas Byrne: I was not aware of that because I had raised that before with the former Minister-----

Deputy Joe McHugh: But there will still be different groups and individuals-----

Deputy Thomas Byrne: I am worried that at some point the wrong person will be allowed into a school through no one's fault and then there will be a row over why there were no guidelines on this so I am glad that has happened. That is not just for sex education but that is where it famously comes up. There are a whole range of areas.

Deputy Joe McHugh: I am with the Deputy on that. He also mentioned school nurses possibly coming into schools as well and that is part of our wider conversation, whether that is with the HSE or the Department of Health.

On focusing on the structure, the Deputy is right that teachers only have a certain amount of time. They are under pressure and I referenced initiative overload already so we have to take stock of what Deputy Bruton and the committee as a collective have been working on and the initiatives that have been taking place within the Department over the past two and a half years. I am happy to do an evaluation of where we are at. Let us see what is working and what areas we can do better in.

The Deputy mentioned joint responsibility and what he would like me to do as Minister. He said that not all schools should be thrown together and there should be joint responsibility. That is a wider conversation that we can have in the future. He also referenced child and adolescent mental health services, CAMHS, and that goes back to where we get this-----

Deputy Thomas Byrne: My point was that the-----

Chairman: Please speak through the Chair.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: Gabh mo leithscéal. My point was that the schools cannot do everything and that needs to be recognised because sometimes we forget that.

Deputy Joe McHugh: Yes and it goes back to acknowledging that there are different initiatives in different schools. They involve such matters as the school helping the local athletics club building a new track. That collaboration is there. We can learn a lot from these individual examples where initiatives are working and the collaboration and volunteerism is thriving. There are plenty of volunteers coming into schools but it goes back to the Deputy's point about the code of practice. There is a philosophy, ethos and code of practice in the school that needs to be adhered to as well.

Deputy Hildegard Naughton differentiated between well-being and empathy which was a very important point when we are moving into the area of emotional intelligence and being able to deal with those situations along with being able to deal with all of the pressures that there are on young people, whether it be anxiety issues or other challenges in the different worlds that they live in. We have to be able to adapt to that but again it goes back to schools. So many schools do this so well. There are so many good leaders and individuals and if there are examples of initiatives working, we have to be open to those new ideas. As somebody who comes from a community development background as well as a teaching background, I know the bottom up approach is where the real leadership is. When I come in as a new Minister to meet my officials in the Department, I know my vision is no good unless it is inclusive, which we talked about, and unless we are learning from the good things happening already. There are 1,300 staff working in the Department of Education and Skills. I met a number of them in Marlborough Street. I will look to them to find out what they have learned and where they see the strengths but also to this committee and the practitioners themselves, including teachers and anybody in a leadership position in the primary, secondary and third level sector. It will be a cross-school and cross-community partnership approach. It is all in the document. I flicked through the well-being document last night. It talks about relationships, partnership, collaboration and working together. There are also incentives and new digital strategies. There are incentives around clustering. There are all these new initiatives that we need to bring focus to but there are examples of how we can work together. Culture and training have been mentioned. It is a question of decisions around resourcing. Where do we allocate the resources? These are the decisions that are made in the context of budgetary decisions.

Senator Byrne talked about well-being, mental health and also mindfulness. A lot of work is

being done on mindfulness. There is also a recommendation in the mental health report to establish an expert group to investigate the appropriateness, feasibility and best practice approach regarding the introduction of mindfulness. I have an expanded circular here. It is a skill that can be usefully taught to young people as part of the SPHE curriculum. The use of mindfulness in education has a lot in common with and can complement the SPHE curriculum which aims to teach children about managing emotions and developing relationships. Mindfulness is likely to be useful to support this implementation but it is unlikely to replace it. It can have a positive impact and can fit into a wide range of contexts for pupils and staff. The practice of mindfulness can be part of developing a healthy lifestyle. There is quite a bit of work done on that. We are considering the introduction of mindfulness as an approach that can be used to promote well-being. It would be an important factor. Access to psychologists is really important and timely. If a psychologist was on maternity leave, for example, it is important that there would still be support and access. Inclusiveness was mentioned. We have to be inclusive. That is an agenda I will be pursuing in my new role.

Deputy McLoughlin referenced working relationships and communications. If we are not communicating with stakeholders and if we are not working on a two-way street, communication breaks down and we are not moving forward. It is something I am very conscious of. We worked closely together in my previous role. If a Deputy or Senator, from either side of the House, is trying to find out information, for example on a school project or the status of a capital project, I will work hard to provide that information because it is critical to the work we are involved in, whether in advancing a new school or updating, upgrading or extending classrooms. Deputy McLoughlin talked about 2023. We have an evolving and fluid change within the education system. That is why I want to tighten it to see what we can do within a three-year period. I flagged with my officials yesterday morning that it is what I want to do and that is where the committee comes in. I appreciate the committee's involvement at an early stage. There is no point working on a 2019 plan in January or February. Within the next couple of weeks I will be happy to come back in here and discuss it again.

The Chairman spoke about mental health and mental illness and the distinction between them, with which I agree. She also spoke about the collaboration with the Department of Health. The promotion of positive mental health was nearly the cornerstone of the report. We have cross-departmental work, which the committee will be aware of. In the 2018 report on the pathfinder project, the Departments of Health, Education and Skills and Children and Youth Affairs reported on youth mental health and proposed setting up an office to co-ordinate services. It will continue to work on that. It goes back again to the relationship between different Departments and the communication and collaborative approach. I am happy to work with the committee on that.

The well-being plans were mentioned. Every school will have to self-evaluate. There will be a self-evaluation project. The recommendations were mentioned. I will have an expansive breakdown of those. There will be more information and engagement on the development stage. Promoting well-being among teachers is really important. I will repeat myself on the issue of how we can support teachers. If we support our teachers, the students are supported. They have natural abilities. They are caring, kind and empathetic and have emotional intelligence and all that but they also need support if the workload is impeding them in any way. That is why it is so important to get it right in terms of what is and is not working and where the weaknesses and strengths are.

With regard to a pilot initiative by the Department, led by the Association of Teacher Educa-

tion Centres Ireland, ATECI, and part of the creative youth plan to enable the creative potential of every child and young person, I have already spoken to my previous Secretary General in the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht to see how we can work together on the Creative Ireland projects. If there are initiatives we can work together on, I am happy to do that. We can work collaboratively to create clusters within the 68 schools selected as part of the schools excellence fund.

If the committee has any follow-up questions, I am happy to take them.

Chairman: I thank the Minister. Are there any supplementary questions? No.

Deputy Joe McHugh: There was one question asked about the NEPS psychologists. I think it may have been from Deputy Byrne. Of their work, 20% is to build the capacity of schools to support all students. That includes delivering CBT continuing professional development training to teachers on a programme to reduce anxiety and build coping skills. The incredible years programme builds social and emotional competencies and develops student support teams.

There are two or three messages I want to give today. First, I do not have the wisdom or knowledge about how to move forward but I have the capacity to work really hard. It is my job to listen to what the committee has been doing in the past two and a half years and to build on it and to identify the strengths and ways to move forward. I really look forward to working with the committee.

Chairman: I thank the Minister. With regard to the programmes the Minister mentioned, I will point out that unfortunately not every school has the opportunity to roll out those programmes. There are many more schools that would need to. Even if we could look at the expansion of some of those programmes it would really make a difference.

I thank the Minister for coming and engaging with us today. We were happy to defer the proposed engagement on the Action Plan for Education. We look forward to engaging with the Minister on that in a few weeks.

I offer the Minister my best wishes and those of the committee as he takes on this large task. Education is important. It is the heartbeat of every community. We look forward to the engagement we will have on a number of different issues. The Minister's inclusive and collaborative approach is welcome. I have no doubt we will work well together. There will be times when we will have to hold the Minister to account. I know the Minister appreciates it will only be in the interest of trying to get the best possible education system that we can have. I thank the Minister's officials for being here.

Sitting suspended at 11.49 a.m. and resumed in private session at 11.55 a.m.

The joint committee adjourned at 12.05 p.m. until 3.30 p.m. on Tuesday, 23 October 2018.