

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

**By Irish National Teachers' Organisation**

**In respect of: School Bullying and the  
Impact on Mental Health**



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## **Introduction**

The Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO) represents over 42,000 teachers in primary and special schools in the Republic of Ireland. The INTO would like to thank the Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science for the opportunity to make this submission on the topic of school bullying and the impact on mental health. At the outset, we wish the Committee to note that the INTO has over the years -although not in recent years-undertaken research in relation to school bullying and this was also included as a topic in our Equality Conference on Mental Health in 2013.

We also wish for the Committee to note that the culture in which primary schools operate is one that is safe and inclusive for all pupils regardless of social background, race, self-identity and learning needs. For that our primary school teachers are held in very high regard across the country. Schools as places of employment for teachers should endeavour to ensure that dignity in the workplace is protected.

## **Class Size**

According to Education at a Glance (OECD 2018), Irish primary school teachers continue to teach larger classes than their colleagues in other countries. The average class size in Irish primary schools remains at 25, the highest in the Eurozone, compared to the EU average of 20 pupils per class. More than 100,000 children in primary school are in classes of more than 30 pupils. The complexity of the contemporary classroom is such that, with larger class sizes, teachers are finding it challenging to meet the broad spectrum of needs of children and to effectively support the social, emotional and behavioural needs of children. Smaller class size would not only give pupils the individual attention and support they require to reach their full potential but also to enable children to develop their self-regulation skills and competencies.

## **Policies and Procedures at school level**

There is a heightened awareness of bullying in school communities, teachers, pupils, parents and the wider school community. There are a number of administrative policies in place in schools to address bullying. These policies include the Code of Behaviour, Child Protection procedures and Dignity at Work. In accordance with the Education (Welfare) Act, 2000 and the guidelines issued by the National Educational Welfare Board (NEWB), all schools are required to have an Anti-Bullying policy within the framework of their overall Code of Behaviour (Governance Manual for Primary Schools [2019-2023] pg. 5). In relation to the Anti-Bullying policy, it is explicitly stated that:

- The Board and school personnel are required to adhere to the procedures in dealing with allegations and incidents of bullying;



- The policy is to be made available to school personnel, published on the school website and provided to the parents' association;
- The principal, as part of the oversight arrangement, at least once in every school term provide a report to the board of management in relation to the numbers of bullying cases reported to him or her and confirmation that all of these cases have been, or are being, dealt with in accordance with the school's Anti-Bullying Policy and the Anti-Bullying Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools;
- The Board must undertake an annual review of the school's Anti-Bullying Policy and its implementation by the school;
- The Board must also ensure that the school has an Anti-Bullying Policy that fully complies with the requirements of the Department's Anti-Bullying Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools issued under Circular 0045/2013.

The Anti-Bullying Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools are being implemented since 2013. We wish the Committee to note that there has been no revision or updating of these procedures since their introduction, nor has there been regular dedicated access to professional development for teachers, school leaders and school Boards of Management. The INTO submits that this is now necessary, particularly in the context of other forms of identity based and cyber-bullying.

Homophobic, biphobic and transphobic bullying or LGBT+ based bullying 'is bullying based on prejudice or discrimination because of someone's actual or perceived sexuality or gender.' (Being LGBT in School' Resource, GLEN/DES, 2016). Children may be a target of this type of bullying because of their LGBT+ identity or their perceived LGBT+ identity, their appearance, their behaviour, their physical traits, because they have LGBT+ friends/family or simply for being different.

Bullying can have both short and long-term consequences but these consequences can be more pronounced for an LGBT+ child who may already be struggling with their developing identity. In primary schools any child who does not conform to stereotypical standards of masculine or feminine behaviour/ appearance can be targeted. Resulting consequences range from damage of self-esteem, truancy and poor academic engagement/attainment. The LGBT+ Ireland Report (2016) found that the most common age for an individual to realise their LGBT+ identity was 12 years old. This roughly equates to 6th class in primary school and leaves young people extremely vulnerable particularly if they are unsure about their own developing identity. Their vulnerability and mental health can be compromised where they are subjected to negative messages from their peers and lack of LGBT+ role models in their school environment.



If not addressed homophobic bullying can impact long term social development and mental health of LGBT+ children. The LGBT+ Ireland Report (2016) indicates that most LGBT+ based bullying starts in school and then moves online. Findings from the report indicate that being bullied in school because of their LGBT+ identity exerted a strong influence on the onset of mental health difficulties for young people. While the participants in this study were older than primary school pupils, ranging from 14 to 25 year olds, the impact on them of LGBT+ based bullying in school is worth noting: had significantly lower scores on the self-esteem scale and they had significantly higher scores on the depression, anxiety, stress, and alcohol use scales.

Similar to LGBT+ based bullying, racist bully or race-based bullying has a particular negative impact on the mental health and wellbeing of those pupils who suffer such bullying. Children who are from the Travelling Community, who are black and children who identify as belonging to a minority ethnic culture are particularly vulnerable to racist bullying. Other children whose mother tongue is not English, who live in Direct Provision Centres or who have black and minority ethnic parents can also be targets of racist bullying. Race based abuse humiliates and dehumanises the heart of a child's identity and undermines their sense of worth. Where non-white Irish children are an obvious minority in a class or school community racist bullying can have a severe impact not only on their self-esteem and academic attainment but also on their sense of belonging to the school community leading to a sense of isolation and distrust in those within the school community.

With many different technological platforms including social network sites, apps and chat-rooms cyber-bullying is increasingly common and a cause of particular concern. As cyber-bullying does not require face to face contact, it can occur at any time (day or night). We note the support from Webwise and the PDST in attempting to combat cyber-bullying and to increase awareness about online safety. Schools also have Acceptable Usage Policies in place which outline the guidelines and behaviours that pupils are expected to follow when using school technologies for school activities of any nature. However, as technologies are constantly evolving, up-to-date guidance and appropriate support must be provided to schools.

The Anti-Bullying procedures emphasize that the prevention of bullying must be an integral part of a school's anti-bullying policy. It requires a school to outline the education and prevention strategies being implemented in the Anti-Bullying policy. It also states that it "*must explicitly deal with the issue of cyber-bullying and identity-based bullying including in particular, homophobic and transphobic bullying*". The fact of the matter is, that whilst management bodies and the INTO endeavour to provide as much support and assistance to schools as possible, and INTO will continue to do so, this assistance and support has never been any professional development and training provided at national level or on a national basis by the DES or any state agency. We submit that there must be centralised whole school and up-to-date professional development and training for teachers and staff, who are by and large front-line and interacting with pupils on a



daily basis. We also submit that these issues should be included in initial teacher education in addition to continuing CPD for teachers.

### **Role of Principals**

The Anti-Bullying Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools state that, “*the Principal in particular has a key role in dealing with bullying behaviour in school because he/she is in a strong position to influence attitudes and set standards in dealing with such behaviour*”. Principals are key in engendering an ethos under which bullying is unacceptable. They regularly provide support to staff in investigating and dealing with bullying issues that arise in schools. They also are involved in communicating with and engaging with parents/guardians and other outside agencies such as CAMHS when issues arise. In addition, they are also responsible for providing an oversight report to their boards of management at least once per term and assisting their boards in dealing with investigating bullying matters. There is a high level of responsibility on Principal teachers to set standards, deal with bullying, engage with agencies and provide reports, often without the necessary and adequate administrative support. The time to undertake such tasks is challenging for Principals particularly for Teaching Principals. Practical supports for Teaching Principals, such as leadership and management time, sufficient well-paid secretarial support and a reduction in paperwork and bureaucracy are required. The additional release time (for Teaching Principals and deputies) provided for the 2020/21 school year must be retained and expanded upon. The Anti-Bullying Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools also state that, “*the role of all those in leadership roles within the school is of great importance in stimulating a school-wide approach to preventing and tackling bullying*”. Therefore, it is imperative that the middle management layer removed from schools since 2009 is restored to assist in providing effective leadership for preventing and tackling bullying. Principals should also continue to have access to quality professional development and training to support them in their roles. There should also be continuous and appropriate training for boards of management.

### **Role of Teachers**

The Code of Professional Conduct for Teachers (Updated 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, 2016) requires all teachers to:

- take all reasonable steps in relation to the care of pupils/students under their supervision, so as to ensure their safety and welfare
- comply with agreed national and school policies, procedures and guidelines which aim to promote pupil/student education and welfare and child protection
- report, where appropriate, incidents or matters which impact on pupil/student welfare.

Teachers recognise the adverse impact that all forms of bullying can have on the mental health of pupils. Teachers have a strong sense of responsibility towards their pupils. In that regard they



take their duty of care to pupils very seriously. INTO members take their role are committed to eliminating all forms of bullying and do everything they can to prevent it in schools through the implementation of school policies, relevant procedures and guidelines. However, this is often done without the requisite professional development and training and provision of the necessary resources. Some children need psychological or psychiatric or mental health supports that are not available in schools. Teachers are not psychologists or psychiatrists. However, teachers would welcome supports and resources that allow them to look out for signs, to build programmes into the curriculum and to have clear routes to specialist services for pupils who require them. It should also be noted that bullying issues can and do often arise outside of the school environment e.g. in the community which can spill in to the school environment. Therefore, it is a matter for parents and communities to play their part in combatting bullying particularly bullying which occurs outside of the school setting. We submit that teachers should not be held accountable for issues which arise outside of the school environment.

### **Curriculum**

Teachers have a strong sense of responsibility towards their pupils and their wellbeing and resilience. Teachers implement a variety of age-appropriate programmes and initiatives such as Friends for Life, Incredible Years, Roots of Empathy. Teachers also employ a wide range of strategies to build and support pupils' wellbeing and resilience including the use of circle time. The *Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools* (2011) required schools to fully implement the Stay Safe programme as part of SPHE. This is also a requirement under the 2017 *Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools*. This programme is a personal safety skills programme designed for pupils from Junior Infants to Sixth Class and seeks to enhance children's self-protective skills by participation in lessons on safe and unsafe situations, inappropriate touch, secrets, telling, stranger danger and bullying. Curricular overload and a plethora of initiatives in other areas can often be a problem for teachers in their planning and implementation of the SPHE curriculum.

As part of the Child Protection Safeguarding Inspection model, the quality of planning for and implementation of the SPHE curriculum and the Stay Safe programme in primary schools is checked during the inspection. The first two checks at primary level seek to establish if the school is providing the required programmes. The subsequent sub-checks then inquire into whether the school and its teachers are planning appropriately for the implementation of these programmes and look at learners' understanding of a number of key topics of the programmes. In view of the fact that the Stay Safe programme is mandatory in all primary and special schools and subject to inspection under the CPSI model, all teachers should have access to continuous professional development throughout their careers.



The increased focus on student wellbeing across education policy and practice provides both an opportunity and a challenge for schools. The central place of wellbeing in the curriculum has been reinforced in recent years with its inclusion as one of four key themes in *Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (2009)* as well as in *the new Framework for Junior Cycle*. Whilst teachers acknowledge the merit of this emphasis on pupil wellbeing, the need for professional development for teachers in this area is highlighted. Although 'Aistear' was published in 2009, there was never any formal introduction and many teachers at infant level who embrace the premise of the framework have accessed training in their personal time, leading to inconsistencies in approaches. The publication of the *Revised Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice (2018-2023)* in October 2019 underlined the vital role of the primary school in the promotion of wellbeing through a variety of activities and approaches supporting the academic, physical, mental, emotional, social, and spiritual development of children and young people. It is essential that, at primary level, children's resilience in dealing with the normal stresses of their lives is fostered to ensure that have the requisite skills to look after their physical wellbeing and that they feel a sense of purpose as a valued member of the school and wider community.

Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) is allocated 30 minutes per week for implementation. One element of the SPHE curriculum (1999) is 'resolving conflict', which seeks to equip children with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to deal with conflict by practising different techniques that focus on identifying the problem and exploring possible solutions. Allied with the work on resolving conflict is the issue of bullying whereby pupils can develop an awareness and understanding of what bullying is, the type of behaviour and the role of various people in bullying situations. The approach adopted to dealing with bullying in SPHE is informed by the school's agreed Anti-Bullying policy and the promotion of healthy, inclusive relationships permeates all aspects of school life. Generally, teachers will draw up individual 'classroom rules' which will include reinforcement of the school's anti-bullying position. Pupils are usually involved in the collation of such classroom charter at the beginning of the academic year, and this serves to increase their sense of responsibility and commitment to adhere to the ground rules. This collective agreement is also important in cultivating a safe environment within the classroom feel comfortable to share their thoughts and feelings with their teacher and peers. 'Circle Time' is a regular feature within the primary classroom at all levels and affords an opportunity for children to develop confidence, self-esteem, enhance their communication skills and support positive classroom relationships.

Within the context of the current review of the primary curriculum, it is proposed that wellbeing be introduced as a distinct subject area incorporating SPHE/RSE and Physical Education. When an evaluation of the implementation of RSE was conducted in 2007 it stated that the low status of SPHE emerged as a significant negative influence on schools (Maynock et al.) and the suggestion that the time allocation for wellbeing would be increased in a reviewed curriculum



has been widely welcomed by INTO members who feel the scope of this subject necessitates more than the current weekly provision of 30 minutes.

Separately, a review of SPHE/RSE has been conducted by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) and the INTO is represented on the Development Group (which is preparing a toolkit of teaching materials to be made available later this year). One key priority for teachers is an updated curriculum focusing on the important learning needed to navigate growing up in the world today. Reflecting the increased influence of technology and the digital world on the lives of young people, safe internet usage and the issue of cyber-bullying will be a critical component in a redeveloped SPHE curriculum. It is imperative that a revised curriculum is accompanied by comprehensive guidance and professional development for teachers to deal with issues that arise in our modern society including bullying and the impact of negative experiences on pupils' mental wellbeing.

The Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated stress and anxiety among young children and during periods of school closure some pupils regressed not only in their learning on an academic level, but also on a social and emotional development. Curriculum guidance published by the Department of Education upon the reopening of schools in September 2020, advised that wellbeing be prioritised, with all schools encouraged to "Slow down to catch up". Teachers recognise the impact that the trauma of the pandemic has had (and continues) to have on pupils' wellbeing and note the inevitable demand for increased resources for primary school teachers to adequately support children's mental health in the months and years ahead.

Given the prevalence of mental health issues among young people and the increase of incidences of challenging behaviour in schools, the INTO welcomes the forthcoming publication of guidelines for teachers. The need for a multi-disciplinary and inter-agency approach to supporting pupils who present with difficulties (for example, social or emotional difficulties that may lead to instances of bullying with an adverse effect on mental health should also be highlighted in the context of curriculum redevelopment). Research indicates that the key challenges to addressing mental-health needs include the shortage of mental-health professionals and the stigma associated with mental disorder (Patel, Vikram, et al., 2007). INTO proposes that consideration be given to the provision of an in-school model of mental health support service.

### **Supports for pupils and teachers affected by bullying**

Bullying can adversely affect the mental health of the individual being bullied. It is recognised that those involved in bullying behaviour may be suffering from their own issues including self-esteem. Vulnerable pupils who are often considered easy targets by peers require adequate support. The Anti-Bullying procedures require that there is a programme of support for both pupils who have been bullied and for those involved in bullying behaviour to be in place. The procedures make reference to learning strategies to increase self-worth and also to the provision





of counselling. However, there is a distinct lack of resources to support pupils and schools to assist in mental health in terms of building resilience and increasing feelings of self-worth. In order to implement learning strategies for pupils targeted supports and resources need to be put in place. In that regard the INTO submits that additional middle management posts and additional resources must be provided for that purpose. In addition, teachers need access to good quality professional development in pupil wellbeing with specific training in educating to prevent LGBT+ based bullying and racist bullying. Given the potential for children to experience trauma as a result of persistent bullying, consideration should be given to developing trauma informed practices at a whole school level and at an individual class level. The INTO also submits that outside supports including NEPS, CAMHS and other appropriate agencies must be enhanced for this particular purpose including investment in specialised supports for minority groups such as LGBT+ children, Traveller children and children of black and minority ethnic children. Consideration should also be given to introducing counselling services for pupils in schools. As already stated in the previous paragraph the INTO submits that consideration be given to the provision of an in-school model of mental health support service for those who have experienced bullying. In-school support services have many benefits including an increase in attendance, a decrease in stigmatisation and improved cross-agency collaboration between teachers and other professionals. Consideration should also be given to subsuming the various external supports for mental health and wellbeing under one umbrella service such as the Inclusion Support Service (ISS). Furthermore, we submit that considerable investment is required overall in mental health services for young people right around the country.

### **Adult bullying**

Most schools have a Dignity at Work policy in place. Teachers are often subject to inappropriate behaviour from school management, colleagues, pupils and parents. This behaviour can be in the form of words, gestures and publication on social media sites. In some cases, this behaviour targets a teacher's LGBT+ identity or their race. Such behaviour can be upsetting to teachers and have a negative impact on them. There are internal procedures to deal with such matters when they arise. However, in light of the recent publication by the HSA *Code of Practice on the Prevention and Resolution at Work*, there is a requirement for the updating of these procedures. The INTO submits that for preventive measures to be put in schools funding should be made available for professional development and training about dignity in the workplace. In addition to support teachers who have been affected, the INTO submits that there must be we an increase in the number of counselling sessions being provided by the Employee Assistance Service. There should also be the provision for support and initiatives at school level. The coaching programmes available to school leaders should be adapted and made available to all teachers as part of a comprehensive professional development support service. The INTO submits that any future Student and Parent Charter must include the right of teachers to be treated with dignity and respect in their workplaces by parents. A Teachers' Charter should also be developed.



### **Parent/Guardian concerns about bullying**

The culture of the Irish primary school system is one of open engagement with parents/guardians and the school community. In this context, it has always been the case that schools foster an open-door policy in their dealings with parents/guardians and that they are encouraged and welcome to raise their concerns including any concerns about bullying with teachers as they arise. It is important that any such concerns are raised sooner rather than later. Pre Covid-19 teachers usually would have met face-to-face with parents/guardians informally in the morning before school and/or after school. There are also the regular parent/teacher meetings. In addition, parents/guardians are always welcome to come to primary schools by appointment, either during school hours or often at times immediately before or after school. In the current climate schools have alternative arrangements in place for parents/guardians to raise any issues or concerns. These interactions provide for parents to raise any concerns they may have regarding bullying issues relating to their children and for teachers to be made aware of them at the earliest opportunity so that they may be addressed. In that regard, the INTO is not opposed to formalising the terms of relations as currently exist at local level and in that regard the INTO submits that for any proposed or potential Student and Parent Charter to become meaningful and effective in practical terms, principles and procedures must be negotiated and agreed centrally, and adequate supports, resources and professional development and training must be provided.

### **Recommendations**

The INTO would like to summarise its recommendations to the Committee:

- That a longitudinal empirical Irish study be undertaken in relation to the topic *School Bullying and the Impact on Mental Health* with pupils and school staff including teachers;
- Smaller class sizes to effectively support the holistic development of all children and to support pupils who experienced bullying;
- A review and updating of the Anti-Bullying Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools;
- Leadership and management time, secretarial support, a reduction in paperwork and bureaucracy, the restoration of middle management posts is required for Principal teachers and in particular Teaching Principals;
- That sufficient up-to-date professional development, supports and resources, including appropriate professional advice is provided by the DE to principals, school staffs and



boards of management in Anti-Bullying procedures and guidelines including specific training in educating to prevent LGBT+ based bullying and racist bullying;

- The current SPHE curriculum needs to be reviewed to ensure it meets the current needs of all pupils. The revised Primary School; Curriculum should place more emphasis on pupil wellbeing, drawing on the Department of Education's Wellbeing Framework for policy and practice;
- All teachers should have access to continuing professional development throughout their careers on wellbeing, SPHE, Stay Safe and anti-bullying. In addition, any revised SPHE curriculum should be accompanied by comprehensive guidance and professional development for teachers;
- All pupils should have an opportunity at some stage during their primary school years to become involved in programmes that support their wellbeing. In that regard, there should be quality investment in pupil wellbeing;
- There should be increased resources for teachers to adequately support pupils' mental health, social development and wellbeing due to the adverse impact of Covid-19;
- There needs to be a multi-disciplinary and inter-agency approach to dealing with pupils who present with difficulties e.g. social or emotional difficulties. It should not be left to the school and indeed teachers to solve all problems;
- That consideration should be given to the provision of an in-school model of mental health support service for those who have experienced bullying;
- That there should be considerable investment in mental health services such as CAMHS;
- That there should be funding for preventative measures and enhanced support services for teachers as employees in their workplaces;
- Teachers need to undertake continuous professional development in order to keep abreast of the latest developments in education and the increasing demands of the 21st century classroom. Schools need to promote and support CPD among their staff. Adequate funding must be available to support teacher CPD;



- That any future Student and Parent charter must be negotiated and agreed centrally, and must include the right to teachers' dignity at work. A Teachers' Charter should also be developed.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the INTO recognises the impact that school bullying can have on mental health for both teachers and pupils and as a stakeholder is committed to tackling same. We remain committed and endeavour to provide as much support and assistance to schools as possible. We call for further supports at national level or on a national basis by the DES or any state agency.

We again thank the Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science for the opportunity to make this submission on the topic of school bullying and the impact on mental health.

**On behalf of the INTO**

**18<sup>th</sup> February, 2021**



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