

Check against Delivery



**INTO Opening Statement to Joint Oireachtas Committee
on Education and Further and Higher Education, Research,
Innovation and Science**

May 2021

School Bullying and the Impact on Mental Health

Thank you for the opportunity to be here today. The INTO recognises the impact that school bullying can have on the mental health of both pupils and teachers and is committed to tackling all forms of bullying. We endeavour to provide as much support and assistance to our members and schools.

When we think back to our own school days, we may remember the culture and classroom environment that predominantly prevailed. There was much focus and emphasis on achievement. The sands have shifted and are continuing to shift to a greater focus and emphasis on pupil wellbeing. Nowadays there are a range of policies, procedures, practices and strategies in schools to promote pupil wellbeing. Fostering wellbeing is one the competencies that will underpin a revised Primary School Curriculum currently being prepared by the NCCA. Whilst we are on the right track, there is still some way to go in terms of supporting pupil wellbeing in our schools. Teacher professional development and learning programmes should include a dimension on wellbeing.

Bullying can be either overt or subtle and can be racial, homophobic, disability- related or based on any form of difference. Bullying, regardless of form or type, can have an impact on mental health. In relation to LGBT+ bullying, in February 2020 the INTO published the results of a survey carried out with teachers. The survey found that the majority of respondents reported that they had not received any training in how to educate about and prevent homophobic/transphobic bullying and a large cohort stated that they would like training in this area.

We recommend that there is a need for the updating of the Anti-Bullying procedures for schools, for professional development and strategies and supports to address identity-based and cyber bullying.

Teachers have a strong sense of responsibility towards their pupils. However, they are not psychologists or psychiatrists. Psychological, socio-emotional and mental health supports are practically non-existent for our primary pupils. Both NEPS and CAMHS are understaffed and should be expanded. INTO recommends that schools should have counsellors and therapists available to pupils who require such interventions and supports when they have experienced bullying or have engaged in bullying behaviours. Such supports would go a long way in having a positive impact on mental health.

Schools are also places of employment. Teachers are often subject to inappropriate behaviour. Whilst not often named, but identifiable in cases, teachers are often subject to negative comments and untoward behaviour from parents on social media platforms.

The importance of an inclusive school environment for all members of the school community cannot be overstated. We are concerned that teachers who identify as LGBT+ may not always feel accepted or represented in their workplaces. That has to change.

We recommend that teachers are provided with comprehensive professional development, training and support in LGBT+ inclusion and visibility within the school environment. All teachers, irrespective of their sexual orientation, race, or disability must be treated with dignity and respect in their workplaces.

As there must be a shared responsibility to tackling bullying in society, this should also be the case in schools. School leaders and principal

teachers must be adequately supported through a further restoration of middle management posts. This is vital in order to create and/or maintain a culture of inclusion and acceptance.

Go raibh maith agat as an gcuireadh bheith anseo agus is féidir liom ceisteanna a thógáil.