

# Submission

**Joint Committee on Education,  
Further and Higher Education,  
Research, Innovation & Science**

**On Mental Health Supports in  
Schools & Tertiary Education**

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Submission by the INTO

To the Joint Committee on Education,  
Further and Higher Education, Research,  
Innovation and Science

On the Mental Health Supports in Schools  
and Tertiary Education

25 August 2022



## **1. Introduction**

The Irish National Teachers' Organisation is the oldest and largest teachers' trade union in Ireland. It represents almost 50,000 teachers at both primary in the Republic of Ireland and primary and post primary level in Northern 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 Mental Health Supports in Schools and Tertiary Education.

We would ask the Committee to note that the INTO has over the years highlighted the topic of Mental Health, Congress 2022 passed a comprehensive motion on the Mental Health of Primary School Children, our Education Consultative Conference in 2021 had a focus on Wellbeing and Mental Health was 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 strives to be safe, healthy and inclusive for all pupils regardless of social background, race, self-identity and learning needs. Primary teachers are profoundly aware of the importance of the wellbeing of their pupils. The challenge of protecting the mental health and wellbeing of primary school children must not be underestimated.

## **2. The Current Situation in Primary Schools**

National research carried out with children and young people by the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland in 2013 (RCSI Perl Study) suggests that approximately one in three young people will have experienced some type of mental disorder by the age of 13. This rate rises to over one in two by the age of 24 years, particularly where early intervention does not take place.

Despite evidence showing the value in safeguarding and promoting mental health in childhood, Ireland's child and adolescent mental health services are experiencing several significant issues. These have been well publicised over the last twelve months and include a lack of services at community and school level and difficulties in recruiting qualified staff, along with excessive waiting lists for specialist mental health treatment services. School principals have recently reported wait times of up to four years in some areas. This is unacceptable and we cannot continue to accept the excessive waiting lists for specialist mental health treatment services for children

Research conducted by Dr. Rosaleen McElvaney et al from Dublin City University in 2017 found that the needs of children in primary school in relation to their psychological wellbeing are complex. This research identified the range and severity of difficulties that children present with in primary schools. It also focused on the varied family and cultural contexts that are a feature of their daily lives and the serious nature of critical incidents that schools are dealing with. All of these factors impact on children's emotional wellbeing. The range and severity of emotional issues identified and reported include;

- general family issues (noted by 85.8% of principals)
- separation/divorce/marital breakdown (79%)
- anxiety issues (78.9%)

In addition, school principals noted significant levels of bullying (54.1%), cyber-bullying (36.7%), self-harm (28%), suicidal ideation (22.9%), depression (27.9%), eating disorders, (14.9%); and sexual identity issues (8.7%), all of which impacted on the mental health of the children under their care.

We note that school is the service that engages with children on an almost daily basis. Schools and school personnel should be supported by all other services when nurturing the positive mental health of their pupils.

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.

INTO Congress in April 2022 noted the dearth of Mental Health Support and Services for primary school children. During debate on a motion on Children’s Mental Health, delegates reported that more and more children are presenting in primary school classrooms experiencing anxiety, poor mental health and poor emotional wellbeing, particularly in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. We are also aware that there is an increase in the number of pupils at primary level who need behavioural and emotional interventions and that referrals to CAMHS and other services have risen by 40% in recent years. These reports from teachers on the ground reflect the research referred to above.

In light of this, the INTO is calling for the Department of Education to immediately publish the long-awaited Guidelines for Schools on Behaviours of Concern.

Congress also called for:

- increased NEPs provision for schools and clarity regarding the level of provision which schools can expect to receive each year;
- a national framework to inform the development of counselling services for primary school children;
- resources to introduce on-site school counselling in primary schools in line with international best practice.

### **3. Early Intervention and Community Support**

As educators we recognise that the experience of mental ill-health and poor emotional wellbeing can have a significant adverse impact on the development of the child. We are extremely concerned at the continuing lack of access for primary school children to mental health services at community and school level. It is widely agreed that mental health services for children under twelve years old are inadequate and in some areas, almost non-existent. Early intervention is a central tenet in addressing difficulties experienced by children and young people. It is integral to addressing educational needs, it should be likewise when



addressing mental health and wellbeing needs.

We also note that current Government policy dictates that all mental health (and indeed other professional services for children) should be provided in the “community”. There is extensive international research to indicate that services which are co-located in schools experience a higher level of engagement and success. We would argue that schools are an integral part of the communities in which pupils and their families reside. We would ask the Government to re-examine and re-define community in this context.

In 2018 the Ombudsman for Children’s Office conducted a consultation with young people under 18 years receiving inpatient care and treatment for their mental health, The young people spoke about the importance of school staff having sufficient knowledge about mental health to be able to support young people in relation to their mental health and wellbeing, including young people experiencing mental health difficulties. These young people placed considerable emphasis on prevention and early intervention measures. This information, gleaned from the young people who participated in the consultation, further emphasises the place of the school as central to the lives and community of our pupils.

#### **4. Supports for Schools and Teachers**

INTO welcomes the Department of Education and HSE In-school and Early Years Therapy Support Demonstration Project and appeals for the expansion of the project and the recruitment and retention of sufficient specialist staff. We call for the existing teams of Occupational Therapists and Speech and Language Therapists to be expanded to include Educational Mental Health Professionals. Similar schemes in the UK have enjoyed enormous success. For further information on such successes please see [here](#)<sup>1</sup>

This demonstration project has the potential to have significant positive impact if properly resourced.

While INTO members are committed to supporting the positive mental health and emotional development of their pupils, this is often done without the requisite professional development and training and provision of the necessary resources.

Teachers are not therapists, psychologists or psychiatrists and should not be expected to act as such. While it is acknowledged that teachers know their pupils well and are well placed to respond to many of their needs, it should never be assumed that teachers should replace appropriately qualified therapeutic professionals. However, teachers would welcome supports and resources that would allow them to look out for signs and symptoms, to build programmes into the curricula they deliver and to have clear routes to specialist services for pupils who require them.

Parents and communities also have a vital role to play their promoting and supporting positive mental health outside of the school setting. We submit that appropriate supports should also be provided in communities to support parents and families who need access to information as well services at local level. We note Recommendation 13 of *Sharing the Vision: A Mental Health Policy for Everyone* and appeal for the establishment of the promised portal to increase

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<sup>1</sup><https://moderngov.rotherham.gov.uk/documents/s128894/ENC%20%20-%20MHST%20quarterly%20report%20April%20-%20June%202020.pdf>

awareness of the services available across all communities.

## 5. Curriculum

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*. 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.

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.

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. This has been widely welcomed by INTO members who feel the scope of this subject necessitates more than the current weekly provision of 30 minutes for Social Personal and Health Education.

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 must be a critical component in a redeveloped curriculum framework.

It is imperative that a revised curriculum is accompanied by comprehensive guidance and professional development for teachers.

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.

## 6. Recommendations

INTO recommends:

- Schools are provided with adequate, age-appropriate supports for children presenting with mental health issues to meet their ongoing needs.
- Increased NEPs provision for schools.
- The development of a national framework to inform the development of counselling services for primary school children.
- Funding and resources to introduce on-site school counselling in primary schools in line with international best practice.



- Increased funding of existing mental health services including CAMHS.
- Sufficient up-to-date professional development, supports and resources, including appropriate professional advice is provided by the DE to principals and school staff.
- Additional middle management posts to facilitate mental health supports in schools.
- Any revised curriculum framework allowing children to become involved in programmes to support wellbeing must be accompanied by comprehensive guidance and professional development for teachers.

## 7. Conclusion

In conclusion, the INTO recognises the urgency in providing mental health supports for primary school pupils, especially at school level. These supports must be properly resourced and meet the needs of the school community. We remain committed to the support of the pupils in our care.

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 the mental health of children and young people.

## 8. References

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New mental health support in schools and colleges and faster access to NHS care. [online: <https://www.england.nhs.uk/mental-health/cyp/trailblazers/> ]

NCCA Draft Primary Curriculum Framework, NCCA Dublin 2020; <https://ncca.ie/en/resources/ncca-primary-curriculum-framework-2020pdf/>