

INTO Submission

Strategic Framework for Lifelong Guidance

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Irish National Teachers' Organisation
Cumann Múinteoirí Éireann

Submission on behalf of the INTO

To the Guidance Unit, Department of
Education

On the development of a Strategic
Framework for Lifelong Guidance



Introduction

The Irish National Teachers' Organisation is the oldest and largest teachers' trade union in Ireland. It represents almost 50,000 teachers at primary level in the Republic of Ireland and primary and post primary level in Northern Ireland. The INTO would like to thank the Guidance Unit of the Department of Education for the opportunity to make this submission on the development of a Strategic Framework for Lifelong Guidance.

Lifelong Guidance (LLG), if implemented correctly, could play a crucial role in primary education by helping whole school communities to develop the skills and knowledge necessary for success in school and in life. Guidance counsellors in primary schools could provide academic counselling, career counselling, and personal/social counselling to school leaders, teachers, pupils, and their families. The services provided by a guidance counsellor at primary level might go some way to combatting the increasing levels of anxiety among pupils and the stress and burnout felt by teachers and school leaders.

The INTO would like to commend the cross-departmental approach being taken by the government as outlined in this strategic framework's consultation paper. The Department of Education (DoE), Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS), the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY), the Department of Social Protection (DSP) and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (DETE) are cited as playing a pivotal role in the development of this strategic framework. The INTO hopes the framework will adopt an approach to lifelong guidance that can be embedded in the whole community and will not become a hastily created initiative foisted upon the already overloaded and under-resourced education system.

The Current Situation in Primary Schools

Presently there are no structures in place dedicated to supporting pupils, teachers or principals in primary education with lifelong guidance. The now defunct National Centre for Guidance in Education (NCGE) was established with the mission of developing and supporting quality guidance provision in the education sector but failed to develop any significant plan for primary education. While the INTO welcomes the development of this strategic framework for lifelong guidance, we also ask that it caters for, and supports, all levels of the Irish education system.

It is now a common theme among commentators that schools and teachers should be doing more to support their pupils' mental health, well-being and guidance needs. The reality is that teachers are educators, not trained therapists or mental health professionals. While teachers do have a strong understanding of their pupils' needs and may identify behaviours of concern or other issues, it is not within their expertise to provide direct therapy or mental health support. It is important, then, that teachers receive the necessary resources and training to recognise signs and symptoms of mental health and behavioural concerns and have clear pathways to access specialised support for their pupils, including guidance counselling. By equipping teachers with the necessary tools and resources, they can better support their pupils' well-being and provide a safe and nurturing learning environment. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge in this guidance framework that teachers cannot, and should not, be expected to take on the roles of therapist, psychologist, or counsellor.

The INTO wishes to bring to the attention of the Guidance Unit that the educational needs of all children are met through a continuum of provision that includes special schools and classes which are currently operating without adequate funding or safeguards for behaviours that may be harmful for pupils, teachers and SNAs in these settings. While the INTO supports the policy of inclusion, it must only be implemented where it is in the best interest of the child and where adequate resources are provided to meet their needs. It is crucial to consider the impact on both the child and the class teacher when a child is placed in a mainstream setting that is unsuitable or where necessary supports are not provided. An inclusive approach to education that is not fully supported through adequate



resources, support, therapeutic services, and professional development can create significant challenges for pupils with special needs and their teachers. The INTO sees an opportunity for guidance counsellors to support behaviour programmes in mainstream, special class and special school settings. However, we warn against viewing guidance counsellors as a panacea for the current lack of targeted, specialised therapies that can only be provided by trained professionals such as occupational therapists, psychologists, nurses etc.

INTO Congress 2022 highlighted the severe shortage of mental health support and services for primary school children. During discussions on a motion on Children's Mental Health, delegates reported an ever-increasing number of children in primary school classrooms displaying symptoms of anxiety, poor mental health, and emotional distress. Additionally, it was noted that the number of pupils at the primary school level requiring behavioural and emotional interventions had increased, and that referrals to child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) and other related services had risen by 40 per cent in recent years. These observations from teachers who work closely with pupils strengthen the call for a dedicated guidance counselling service in every primary school in Ireland.

Mental Health Supports

Irish primary schools pride themselves on promoting a safe, healthy, and inclusive environment for all pupils, regardless of their social background, race, self-identity, or learning needs. Teachers in primary schools are invested in the well-being of their pupils and understand that safeguarding the mental health of these children is not to be taken lightly. Primary teachers are committed to creating a supportive and nurturing environment that recognises the unique needs of each individual child. The challenges of preserving the mental health and well-being of primary school children must not be underestimated, and require a holistic approach that considers the various factors that impact a child's overall well-being. Teachers and principals continue to show a willingness to work together to create positive and empowering experiences for all pupils against a backdrop of little or no mental health funding and an absence of a coherent national long-term support system.

Despite the large amount of evidence (Davidson et al., 2012; O'Sullivan et al., 2021) which highlights the importance of protecting and promoting mental health during childhood, Ireland's child and adolescent mental health services are currently under resourced and ineffective at a system wide level. These issues have been widely reported over the past year and include a shortage of services at both community and school levels, a struggle to recruit qualified mental health professionals, and alarmingly long waiting lists for specialist counselling and psychological services. This has resulted in school principals reporting wait times of up to four years in certain regions, a situation that is completely unacceptable. The INTO demands that this situation is addressed promptly, as schools, teachers and parents cannot continue to tolerate excessive waiting lists for children who need specialised mental health services.

The education system alone should not shoulder the responsibility of supporting the mental health and well-being of pupils. Parents and communities must also play a role in this effort. The provision of proper resources and supports to families and communities is essential to promote positive mental health both in and outside of the school setting. The provision of services at a local level is vital in ensuring that parents and families have access to the supports they need. Schools, parents, and communities should be supported to create a comprehensive network of mental health, well-being and guidance services that benefit every individual in that community.

Guidance to Support Lifelong Learning

The field of lifelong guidance (LLG) focuses on ensuring access to quality guidance services for all individuals throughout their lives. Other countries have taken different approaches to the provision of LLG services, including the explicit approach (Barnes et al., 2020), where legislation covers LLG



services across contexts and the development of LLG policies. This approach is characterised by the establishment of the entitlement of citizens to receive LLG services, with the responsibility for providing guidance falling to both the state and regional authorities. The establishment of local guidance councils and individual training courses, as well as the engagement of social partners and employers, are examples of the measures taken in this approach. Drawing on the experiences of countries such as France, Romania, Denmark, and Iceland, the INTO would like to see the following points included in the development of guidelines for primary schools that promote equitable access to quality LLG services for all pupils, teachers, parents and principals.

The INTO recommends:

- **Developing an all-inclusive guidance counselling programme:** This should be comprehensive, community based and include a range of services, such as academic support, career counselling, and personal/social counselling which would be available in all communities. This will ensure that all primary schools and their communities have access to the support they need to succeed in school, the workplace and in life.
- **Partnering with key stakeholders:** Working with organisations such as support services, advocacy groups and community organisations will ensure that the guidance programme is well-coordinated, effective, and embedded in the community, not centred solely in schools. This will also help to ensure that the programme is tailored to the specific needs of the local community.
- **Including school leaders in framework development:** Including schools and school leaders at all stages of the development of this strategic framework will ensure any issues are identified early and that schools are equipped to deliver services effectively. This may include upskilling teachers/deputy-principals to step into the role of guidance counsellors, as well as training on how to work collaboratively with teachers in supporting different populations of pupils.
- **Establishing clear guidelines for the operation of LLG in Primary Schools:** Establishing clear guidelines in this strategic framework will ensure that it is implemented consistently across schools. This should include guidelines for the types of services offered by a guidance counsellor, as well as guidelines for how pupils are referred to the in-school service.
- **Monitoring and evaluating the programme:** Regular monitoring and evaluation of the programme will ensure that it is effective and has a positive impact on the well-being of pupils and teachers. This should include collecting data on the number of pupils and teachers served, as well as positive and negative feedback from pupils, staff, and other stakeholders.
- **Using technology:** Incorporating technology in the strategic framework can provide additional support, such as online counselling, or online academic and career counselling resources.
- **Fostering a positive guidance culture:** Creating a positive guidance culture in wider society where people feel comfortable seeking help and support is crucial for the success of this strategic framework. It will help build a lifelong guidance culture in schools. This can be achieved through promoting positive relationships, open communication, and a sense of social responsibility.
- **Collaborating with other services and supports:** To ensure the effective implementation of this strategic framework, it is crucial to coordinate and allocate resources in a timely manner for the provision of all support services, including any new guidance programme. A cross-sectoral approach should promote equitable access for all members of society and ensure access to essential mental health, well-being, and lifelong guidance services for all when necessary.



Conclusion

To effectively implement any new strategic framework on guidance, it is extremely important that sufficient time is allocated to allow teachers to familiarise themselves with its content, objectives, and teaching methods. The INTO calls for a well-planned implementation phase that provides schools with enough time to understand and integrate any new developments or personnel with existing systems. To support this process, comprehensive and ongoing in-service training is essential to build the confidence and competence of teachers in implementing actions from the strategic framework. Developing relationships between mainstream teachers and guidance counsellors should also play a crucial role in this process. A clear understanding of roles within the school must be set out in the framework to maximise the delivery of mental health, well-being, and lifelong guidance supports to pupils. By working together, teachers and guidance counsellors can ensure that the new guidance framework is fully integrated and effectively implemented in the primary school setting, benefiting pupils and promoting positive outcomes for all.

School principals and teachers are currently overburdened with excessive administrative duties. This is a major concern and affects the overall education experience of pupils. The workload of school leaders and teachers is growing at an alarming rate, causing them to divert attention away from their primary role as educators. It is imperative that any new guidance framework does not add to this workload. The INTO recommends that any new guidance policy is accompanied with resources and tools to help mitigate against any increase in workload and allows teachers and school leaders to focus on providing high-quality educational experiences for their pupils.

The INTO highlights the need for increased support due to the excessive workload faced by school principals as outlined in the latest INTO workload survey (2022). To address this issue, the INTO advocates for the provision of additional release time for principals and the return of release time for deputy principals. Furthermore, the INTO calls for the full restoration of middle-management posts in schools. Additionally, the INTO suggests a review of the appointment thresholds for administrative principals and deputies, taking account of all school staff, not just teachers. The INTO also believes that all special schools and schools with special classes should have administrative principals. To effectively support school leaders, the DE must also consider their remuneration taking account of the management of ancillary staff and other school personnel. Through these measures, the DE will enhance the ability of school leaders to focus on leading teaching and learning within their schools.

The progression from early learning centres (ELCs) to primary school and from primary to post-primary education must be recognised as times of significant change for pupils. Improving the transition between these settings should be a priority in this strategic framework. The INTO advocates supporting the relationships between ELCs, primary, and post-primary schools to meet the needs of both pupils and teachers and calls for the implementation of a comprehensive guidance counselling strategy during these times of significant school transitions. Further to this, the INTO wishes to have assurances that any actions outlined in the new framework do not result in additional administrative responsibilities, in or out-of-school hours, for teachers and school leaders.

The INTO calls for a review of the current modes of communication between government education bodies and teachers regarding system changes and consultation procedures. Effective and transparent communication at each stage of new strategies or initiatives is crucial in ensuring all stakeholders participate in a well-informed and meaningful manner. The INTO recommends that the Department of Education and other support services review their communication strategies and develop a plan to provide the necessary information to the maximum number of schools, principals, and teachers to facilitate system changes.



References

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