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Education and Training
Boards Ireland

*Boird Oideachais agus
Oiliúna Éireann*



School Bullying and The Impact on Mental Health

Opening Statement & Submission

Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI) opening statement to the Joint
Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and
Science

on

“School Bullying and The Impact on Mental Health”.

25th May 2021

On behalf of Education and Training Boards Ireland, and the 16 Education and Training Boards (ETBs) that ETBI represents, I am very pleased to make this statement to the Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science on the topic of School Bullying and the Impact on Mental Health.

ETBs are statutory authorities which have responsibility for education and training, youth work and a range of other statutory functions. ETBs manage and operate community national schools, second-level schools, further education colleges, and a range of adult and further education centres in communities throughout Ireland.

While our initial written submission highlights the views and experiences of the sector in more detail, the following outlines some of the more significant observations.

The parallel issues of bullying and mental health have never been more to the fore, particularly in recent months, as we all navigate the new and old spaces that have been occupied as part of our sector’s ongoing response to education provision. Research informs us of the significant impact of bullying on mental health in ‘normal’ circumstances and this has no doubt been compounded in different ways as we tackle our Covid response. In addition, the relationship between bullying and mental health is further challenged by the reality that some young people are bullied because of their mental health issues and some develop mental health issues because of being bullied.

The policies and practices of anti-bullying procedures in schools under the patronage of Education and Training Boards, at both Primary and Post Primary level, are directed

in the first instance by Department of Education guidelines and circulars. Additional materials and resources are accessed through the aligned support agencies such as the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment and the Professional Development Service for Teachers to name two.

As mentioned in our longer written submission, ETBI also wishes to acknowledge, and reaffirm, the significance of school culture as an important influence on tackling bullying at local level. The ETB core values of Care, Respect and Equality lay the foundation for a responsive approach at individual, collective and community level, for tackling both bullying and any aligned mental health impacts.

In addition to incorporating Department of Education policy and its aligned requirements, schools in the ETB sector also endeavour to engage in whole sector approaches which demonstrate and adopt diversity of engagement. These models of practice originate both within and outside of the formal education sector and aim to embed a preventative approach where possible. These engagements include the Goodness Me, Goodness You programme, which underpins the Community National School policy to respect and recognise diversity, the Instructional Leadership Programme, which supports schools to facilitate the voice of the learner and ETB schools' engagement in the BeLongTo – Safe and Supportive Schools programme embracing a Whole School Community Model designed to create schools that are fully inclusive of LGBTI+ young people.

As acknowledgement and recognition of local and cultural context, many individual ETBs and indeed schools supplement specific elements of existing programmes with Transition year, Leaving Certificate Applied, and as part of individual subject specifications across the formal. In the informal and non-formal school community, student support and the impact of 'one good adult' can be witnessed through activities aligned to Wellbeing Provision Mapping, extracurricular, cross curricular and community links as well as contribution to and from parents and guardians. Structured local programmes are also utilised where appropriate such as the Empathy Education Programme and, Restorative Justice Approach.

While the ETB sector endeavours to be responsive and pre-emptive in its approach to bullying and any mental health impacts, it will also continue to advocate for additional beneficial supports aligned to these issues. Our current recommendations request the

timely development of school-based resources related to online harassment and harmful communications as well as initiatives which support the resilience and positive mental health of our Principals, Deputy Principals, Teachers, and support staff.

In conclusion, it can be difficult to identify when students in our care are involved in bullying, whether as the person being bullied, the perpetrator, or both, and there are many ways that a young person can be affected both within and outside the school setting. Continuing to advocate for and assist in supporting students through any aligned mental health challenges that may affect them as a result of bullying, is a priority for all partners in the ETB sector.

We would like to thank you for inviting ETBI to engage with the Committee on these issues and affording us the opportunity to reflect the varying impacts and experiences of the ETB sector.

Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI) submission to the
Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and
Science on

“School Bullying and The Impact on Mental Health”.

18th February 2021

Introduction

Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI) welcomes the invitation by the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science to contribute to the Committee’s examination on *“School Bullying and The Impact on Mental Health”*.

Education and Training Boards (ETBs), statutorily established on 1 July 2013, have responsibility for education and training, youth work and a range of other statutory functions. As of February 2021, ETBs are patrons of a twenty-seven Community National Schools (CNS), and one third of all second level schools in Ireland providing quality multi-denominational second level education to over 100,000 students.

1. Background

As patrons of multidenominational and co-educational schools at both primary and post-primary level, ETBs pride themselves on welcoming and catering for students from diverse backgrounds. All ETB schools, as state schools, are firmly rooted in their local communities with an ethos underpinned by the core values of:

- Excellence in Education
- Care
- Respect
- Equality
- Community

ETB schools aim to provide quality learning and teaching environments that are inclusive, learner-centred, and holistic, and endeavour to support all students reach their full-potential. Central to this philosophy is full access and engagement with the curriculum using approaches and methodologies that ensure optimum outcomes for young people. In addition to their academic needs, the modern school community endeavours to support students in dealing with a range of challenges often resulting in disengagement with the learning process, for example mental health issues.

2. Context

It has been well established within research that there exists a vast range of negative impacts and consequences for those involved in bullying for those who bully others, those who are bullied and those who bully and are bullied¹. Bullying affects young people's character, emotional wellbeing, and mental health. In addition, the relationship between bullying and mental health is further challenged by the reality that some young people are bullied because of their mental health issues and some develop mental health issues because of being bullied.

Schools under the patronage of Education and Training Boards, at both Primary and Post Primary level, establish and operate their policy and practice of anti-bullying procedures as directed by Department of Education guidelines and circulars. The Anti-Bullying Policy is aligned to the school Code of Behaviour and linked to relevant school policies e.g. *Acceptable Use Policy* governing the use of internet in the school. Procedures are further supported by engaging with and implementing activities outlined in supplementary resources and materials provided by various support agencies e.g. *National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, Professional Development Service for Teachers*.

While ETBI acknowledges the value of these policy documents and their aligned supporting and reporting procedures, it is also important to note, and respect, that each schools' culture is different. Responsibility for tackling bullying begins at school level and the ETB core values, outlined at the beginning of this submission lay the foundation for a responsive approach at individual, collective and community level.

A key principle of preventing bullying is a school culture and climate that is positive and welcoming of difference and diversity, based on inclusivity and founded on the core values of Care, Respect and Equality.

Bullying can take many forms and while all bullying needs to be addressed, the issue of cyberbullying has come to the fore particularly during the past year Students have occupied and engaged with the online space for far longer periods, due to school closures aligned to COVID-19. While this online space is beneficial in maintaining connections and continuity of learning, it also provides a platform for some negative experiences.

3. ETBI/ETB Specific Supports

National Level Engagement

In acknowledging the driving force behind a preventative approach to bullying, ETBI and ETBs have engaged with and developed sector specific supports at national level. Models of practice which demonstrate and embrace diversity of engagement include:

- *Goodness Me, Goodness You! (GMGY)*
At primary level, our Community National Schools (CNS) implement the Goodness Me, Goodness You! (GMGY) programme, which underpins the policy of the CNS model to

¹ *National Anti-Bully Research and Resource Century, Dublin City University*

respect, celebrate and recognise diversity in all areas of human life. The GMGY Curriculum supports students’ *“psychological and emotional wellbeing and a positive outlook”*.

- *Instructional Leadership Programme – Learner Voice*
Facilitating learner voice assists in supporting student wellbeing by alleviating the concerns students may encounter in the learning process. ETBI through the *Instructional Leadership Programme*, in partnership with NCCA, is piloting a programme with 39 post-primary schools, including ETB, ACCS and Voluntary Secondary schools, to support schools in facilitating the voice of the learner.
- *Irish Second Level Students Union (ISSU)*
Supporting student voice at a National Level, ETBI and the ETB Directors of Schools have engaged with representatives of ISSU to explore opportunities to meet with regional representatives on a bi-annual basis to engage in conversation on items of importance for the student population in the schools under our remit.
- *BeLongTo – Safe and Supportive Schools*
Commencing in November 2020, 21 ETB schools have partnered with BeLongTo to engage in the next phase of their LGBTI+ Safe and Supportive Schools (SASS) Project. The Project was established to develop and test a Whole School Community Model designed to create schools that are fully inclusive of LGBTI+ young people.

School Level Engagement

At individual school level, policy frameworks are supported by in-school practice at formal, non-formal and extracurricular level. Specific elements of programmes such as Transition Year and Leaving Certificate Applied as well as subject syllabi in Civic Social and Political Education and Social Personal and Health Education, provide a formal space for teaching and learning about issues of bullying and mental health.

These formal experiences are reinforced through additional interactions at individual and whole school level. Involving all members of the school community in a whole school strategy has been found to have the most impact on improved mental health. This collective approach also enhances the possibility of each student encountering the *‘one good adult, who can guide and support a young person at a vulnerable time’*²

Following a survey of our schools in the early part of lockdown in 2020, it was noted that the school Guidance Counsellor proved in many instances to be that ‘one good adult’, as a main source of support in terms of student wellbeing and pastoral care during these school closures.

Some examples of current practice at local level in the ETB sector include:

- *Student Support Team*

² Wellbeing Policy Framework and Statement of Practice 2018 – 2023 (Government of Ireland) p. 15

Ensuring that all policies and procedures in relation to Anti-bullying are regularly reviewed and communicated to staff and students.

- *Wellbeing Provision Mapping*
Highlighting areas for engagement across the formal and non-formal curriculum
- *Extra-Curricular, Cross Curricular & Community Links*
Provides students with opportunities to develop a positive sense of self-worth.
- *Supports for Parents/Guardians*
Valuing the contribution parents make to the school and including them in any bullying training.
- *Empathy Education Programme*
Activating Social Empathy is an interactive, student-focused, social and emotional learning programme, which was developed by Dr Ciara Boylan and Professor Pat Dolan in 2017 as a resource tool for post-primary schools.
- *Pieta House Resilience Academy*
The Resilience Academy is a six-week programme for second year students aimed at equipping students with emotional resilience tools.
- *Working Things Out Programme*
A practical CBT programme that equips young people with the right skills to cope positively and to overcome mental health problems.
- *ETB - Working Committee*
Encompassing mental health and wellbeing support services available across a county/ETB along with school and ETB personnel.
- *Restorative Justice Approach*
Augmentation of authentic student voice across the scheme, which involves the inclusion of the voice of Student Councils at BOM level in schools and updates from representatives of the Student Forum at ETB Board meetings.

4. Recommendations

ETBI commends the range of Department of Education and associated sector supports available for use in our schools. We would also like to propose the following recommendations:

- We note the recent commencement of Coco's Law (The Harassments, Harmful Communications and Related Offences Bill) and establishment of the research observatory on cyberbullying. We recommended the timely development of school-based resources aligned to this research, as our students now spend a greater proportion of their time in the digital space.
- The continued development of and funding for Continuous Professional Development (CPD) on bullying and mental health issues, which acknowledges a multi-part, preventative and whole school approach, inclusive of the broader school community including parents/guardians.
- We would welcome an element of focus and training on Principal, Deputy Principal and Teacher Wellbeing CPD, whose own resilience and positive mental health is vital in

preparing a foundation for engagement with issues surrounding student bullying and any potential mental health concerns.

- The development of a ‘Roadmap of Supports’ which would guide schools towards efficiently accessing resources and organisations who can equip them in mediating the social and cultural changes occurring in our classrooms and schools.

5. Conclusion

It can be difficult to identify when students in our care are involved in bullying, whether as the person being bullied, the perpetrator, or both, and there are many ways that a young person can be affected both within and outside the school setting. Supporting students through the aligned mental health challenges that may affect those students is a priority for all partners in the ETB sector.

While we have outlined in this submission the many formal policy and educational resources which schools draw on to formulate engagement and action, we do not underestimate the importance of the human dimension of social support as a vital coping mechanism for our young people.

Through our current transitions between the live and online space, it remains evident that interaction with and support from ‘one or more good adults’ continues to be influential. It is our hope that future engagement and investment on these issues of bullying and subsequent impact on mental health, continues to value and promote that human element.



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