

**Opening Statement to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Children and Youth Affairs regarding the tackling of childhood obesity (May 16th 2018)**

**Introduction**

The TUI would like to thank the committee for this opportunity to make a submission on the topic of tackling childhood obesity.

**View of the TUI**

The health of young people is a critical matter for society as a whole, as well as for the health and education sectors. In this regard, childhood obesity is a serious problem as children in Ireland are in the upper-range of being overweight according to a study by NCD Risk Factor Collaboration (Irish Times, October 11th 2017). It is clear from the same study that the problem in Ireland is growing rapidly with a nine to ten-fold increase in the number of children in Ireland classified as over-weight since 1975. Safefood Ireland estimates that one in four of children in Ireland is either overweight or obese. The rate of obesity internationally in seventeen-year-olds is approximately twenty percent (OECD, 2015). Frighteningly, a quarter of three year olds in Ireland are overweight or obese (CES, 2016). Obesity is clearly linked to multiple other health difficulties (OECD, 2014) and to changes over time in life-style. However, it is important to make a number of key points in relation to the respective roles of the health and education sectors and of society as a whole.

There appears to be a significant co-relation between childhood obesity and the increasingly sedentary, isolated and on-line recreational patterns of children. These patterns cannot be addressed or modified solely by or through the education system. All of Irish society has a responsibility to react to this public health problem. Growing Up in Ireland (2016: 9), for example, found that “online time was significantly higher among 17/18-year-olds who were *overweight* or *obese*.” Safefood Ireland notes that the average amount of time spent by pre-school children watching television each day is 2.2 hours and that the proportion of students walking to school has halved since 1981. The behaviours reflected in these findings have their origins in the home. Therefore, in the first instance, parents have an over-arching responsibility to safeguard their children’s health and well-being by way of intervening positively to modify these behaviours.

Schools, of course, also have a responsibility – for example by delivering the appropriate PE programme to all students. That programme can serve a very useful role as part of society’s response to the childhood obesity problem. Safefood Ireland recommends that children engage in sixty minutes of physical activity per day. Some, but not all, of this can take place in the school setting. However, schools need to be able to access appropriate physical education facilities in order to support a structured PE programme. Regrettably, far too many schools do not have access to adequate PE facilities. Furthermore, many schools are concerned about a litigious culture in Irish society. Logical but regrettable responses to that litigious culture include schools being so concerned about accidents in the school yard that some have instigated limitations on students’ physical activities, such as running in the school-yard.

Fear also creates a societal climate that hinders physical activity for children. For example, children organising their own play appears to have become a rarity. Furthermore, many parents are concerned about allowing their children to play unsupervised in the street. Society must also examine the fact that obesity in some instances constitutes an eating disorder that is symptomatic of an underlying problem regarding greatly diminished self-esteem. It is therefore possibly a mental health issue as well as a physical health one. A recent radio broadcast in Ireland suggested that a response to childhood obesity would be for schools to regularly weigh children and that teachers may be better-placed than doctors to tell parents that their child is obese. The TUI would like to state that it finds that suggestion extraordinary and bizarre and that evidence shows that schools regularly weighing children leads to further self-esteem issues for those children (Guardian, May 4th 2018).

Issues such as eating disorders or self-esteem require schools to be able to call upon the necessary support services. It is unfortunate that career guidance services for example have been reduced over the last decade. The recent partial restoration is welcome but full restoration of the service is required. Schools also need to be in a position to call upon other support services but, unfortunately, those services have also been under significant pressure recently, despite the best efforts of the staff involved. In the event of a student presenting to a school with an eating disorder, the guidance counsellor will work with the student but also refer the matter to the relevant general practitioner. This work and referral can take considerable time out of the guidance allocation and the follow-up also takes considerable time.

These are legitimate concerns about the limited participation of students in senior cycle of post primary in PE. On occasion, examination subjects have been prioritised and PE has been desultory in its provision. This limitation must be tackled as there is evidence that those who fall away from physical activity at this crucial time may develop patterns of inactivity that have life-long and detrimental health consequences. School culture need to be informed by a concern for health promoting physical activity.

Schools have responsibilities in this area of health education and they carry out their responsibilities to the very best of their abilities, not just in specific curricular programmes like Social, Personal and Health Education and PE but also through a whole school approach to healthy living. However, parents/guardians and families clearly have the primary responsibility in terms of fostering values and practices in relation to health. Indeed, Article 42 the Irish Constitution cites the family unit as the ‘primary educator’.

**Conclusion**

The TUI would like again to thank the Committee for this opportunity to make a submission, and would of course welcome any questions that you may have. The problem of childhood obesity worries the TUI and its members deeply. Schools have an important role to play in the area but responsibilities also fall to parents, communities, the health system and a number of government departments. The great American educationalist Larry Cuban once said that “when society gets an itch schools get scratched”. Schools have responsibilities but so too does society. Schools are neither the cause of all societal problems nor the solution to all of society’s ills. Thank you.

**References**

CES (2016), *Improving Health and Wellbeing Outcomes in the Early Years*, Dublin: Centre for Effective Services

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