

**Opening Statement to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Skills regarding the review of sexual health and relationship education (May 1st 2018)**

**Introduction**

The TUI would like to thank the committee for this opportunity to make a submission on the review of sexual health and relationship education as announced by the Minister for Education and Skills.

**View of the TUI**

The TUI welcomes the review of the RSE programme, particularly given that it has been twenty years since the last review of the programme. The context in which Irish education operates has changed significantly in the last twenty years and a review of RSE is timely. However, it is important to make a number of key points in relation to the review.

Schools have a responsibility for delivering the RSE programme but, in the broader societal context, parents/guardians and families clearly have the primary responsibility in terms of fostering values and practices in relation to sexual health and relationships that are positive and underpinned by respect for oneself and others. Indeed, Article 42 the Irish Constitution cites the family unit as the ‘primary educator’.

It should be noted that teachers generally would not consider their delivery of the RSE programme to be constrained by what was prescribed twenty years ago. In teaching RSE, teachers take into consideration developments in the intervening period. Therefore, they routinely address matters such as marriage equality, LGBTQ+, consent, contraception, safe use of social media etc. Indeed, not only are these matters addressed through RSE but are also often captured as part of other subjects such as Religious Education, Politics and Society, Computer Science, CSPE, SPHE/Pastoral Care and are also expected to be included in upcoming revised subject specifications for ICT as part of the Leaving Certificate Applied programme.

Schools need to be able to decide which teachers are best suited to teaching sensitive matters such as sexuality. Teachers must be able to access high-quality CPD to enable them to carry out this sensitive task. The DES has a responsibility to provide this CPD at a time and venue that is convenient to teachers.

The TUI has a concern that RSE is not available equally in all school settings. The TUI strongly supports the Constitutional protection of religious freedom but also believes that RSE should be available to all students unless the parents of a student explicitly ask for their child to be exempt. The availability of RSE should not depend on the religious ethos or otherwise of the individual school.

It is important to note that RSE is considered a vital part of the Wellbeing area of learning in the revised Junior Cycle. The Wellbeing programme is a ‘whole school activity’. It is quite possible that the opt-out provided for in circular 13/2018 may jeopardise the ability of schools to provide the Wellbeing programme and may in fact constitute a breach of the Junior Cycle agreement between the TUI and the Minister for Education and Skills.

The TUI is aware of reports that some materials and/or speakers being used to support the delivery of RSE in some schools may not be in line with best practice of independence and the provision of non-directive expert knowledge. The TUI believes that it can be useful for schools to use outside materials and/or speakers to support particular parts of the RSE programme. However, it is important that schools are confident that the materials or speaker are in line with best practice and that particular agendas are not pushed by the materials or speaker. It would be helpful to schools if the DES could develop additional resources that schools could then have confidence in using.

The issue of cyber-security has received significant attention recently. Indeed, a recent study by the National Anti-bullying Centre in DCU found that cyberbullying was significantly less common in co-educational settings than in single sex schools (Irish Times April 25th 2018). Matters such as sexting for example are clearly part of good quality RSE. In March 2018 the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Children and Youth Affairs issued a report on the topic of cyber-security and made recommendations regarding schools, such as cyber-safety education being part of the curriculum. However, the TUI would like to remind both the Committee on Education and Skills and the Committee on Children and Youth Affairs that ‘risky’ internet behaviour usually, by its very nature, happens outside of school premises. Parents have a clear responsibility regarding the safety of their children outside of school and it may be unconstitutional for schools to take over that role.

**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 review of RSE is welcomed by the TUI. We believe that the review is timely. Schools have an important role to play in the area of RSE but responsibilities also fall to parents, communities and the DES. 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.