



**Teachers' Union of Ireland (TUI) response to the invitation of the  
Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research,  
Innovation and Science to make a submission as part of the Committee's examination of  
the topic "*School Bullying and the Impact on Mental Health*".**

**(February 2021)**

**Introduction**

The TUI would like to thank the Committee for the opportunity to make this submission on the topic of school bullying and the impact on mental health.

The TUI represents teachers, lecturers and staff (19,000+) in Education and Training Boards (ETBs), voluntary secondary schools, Community and Comprehensive (C&C) schools, Youthreach, institutes of technology and technological universities and those working in out of school services.

**Background**

Ireland has an internationally acknowledged, high-performing education system and a respected teaching profession (Teaching Council, 2010; OECD, 2013; DES, 2018a; OECD, 2015a; NAPD, 2016; Comhairle na nOg, 2017; Growing Up in Ireland, 2017; IPSOS MRBI Trust in the Professions Survey, 2017; Boyle, 2017; Boyle, 2019; Scanlon & McKenna, 2018; EU Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2018; Kantar Millward Brown, 2018; EU Commission, 2018; EU Commission, 2019a; EU Commission, 2019b; Social Progress Initiative, 2018; United Nations Development Programme, 2018, Irish Survey of Student Engagement 2018; HEA, 2019; Coolahan, 2017; Eivers, 2019; CSO, 2019; McKeown et al., 2019; CSO, 2020; OECD, 2020; Eurofound, 2020; McNamara et al., 2020) despite spending relatively little on education (OECD, 2015b; SJI, 2018, NERI, 2018, OECD, 2019a; UNDP, 2019) and experiencing historic

underinvestment (DES, 2018b). Indeed citizen satisfaction with the education system in Ireland is the highest of any of 22 European countries studied by Boyle (2018) whilst parent satisfaction with the Irish education system was the second-highest out of fifty-six countries in Clerkin et al. (2020).

It is also worthwhile noting that 2019 data (OECD, 2019b) shows that both citizen satisfaction with the education system, and the economic return to the taxpayer of investment in education, are both extraordinarily high in Ireland compared to international norms. An Ipsos MRBI survey in 2019 found extraordinarily high levels of public trust in teachers, much higher than for journalists, Gardai, civil servants, politicians, business leaders, social media influencers, bankers or even the “ordinary person in the street” (Irish Times January 31<sup>st</sup> 2019). ESRI (2020) found very high levels of trust of young people in the Irish education system.

Ireland has a very young population (Eurostat, 2015; Government of Ireland 2019; DCYA, 2020). In 2008, we had the second highest proportion of 10-14 year olds in the European Union (CSO, 2009). The high birth rate in Ireland (CSO, 2017; Eurostat, 2017; Government of Ireland, 2019) indicates that the population of young people is likely to remain high for the foreseeable future. The DES (2012, 2017) suggests that the number of students in the primary school system will rise by forty-nine thousand (516,460 to 565,696) from 2011 to 2019 and by almost one hundred thousand in second level between 2011 and 2025 (322,528 to 416,897). The latest projections are that numbers in post-primary will peak at 402,000-410,000 in 2024/25 and fall gradually back to 2015 levels by 2036 (Government of Ireland, 2020; DE, 2020a). In this context, it is not sufficient to suggest that a world-class child centred society can be achieved with inadequate resources of time, money or personnel.

### **Bullying in the Student Population**

Bullying is an invidious and damaging experience for students. The TUI is committed to eliminating it and our members do everything they can to prevent it in schools. It is however important to note that Irish children and students are significantly less likely to encounter chronic bullying than the OECD average (UNICEF, 2017; OECD 2017; UNICEF, 2018; Rawdon

et al., 2020). According to UNICEF (2017), 7.6% of children aged 11-15 in Ireland will encounter chronic bullying compared to the OECD average of 10.8%. UNICEF (2020), has found that

- Ireland ranks 11<sup>th</sup> out of 41 countries for child wellbeing.
- Ireland ranks 13<sup>th</sup> of those 41 countries for quality education.

However, it is often not possible for our members to prevent bullying which occurs outside of schools, for example online. In such circumstances it is often a matter for parents and communities to address and occasionally, in very severe incidents, for Gardai to investigate. A recent survey by CyberSafeKids found that 28% of pre-teens over the age of 8 years are allowed at home to go online whenever they want (Irish Times, February 9<sup>th</sup> 2021). Schools can only address issues which arise in, or directly impact on, school life. Schools cannot be held accountable for matters which arise outside of their jurisdiction. A separate report in the Irish Times of the same day (February 9<sup>th</sup> 2021) stated that “cyberbullying among children and adolescents soared by 28% during the lockdown”. This statistic makes clear that schools are doing an excellent job on minimizing cyberbullying when students are in school. Sadly the same perhaps cannot be said of other stakeholders in relation to when students are not in school.

Schools require support from relevant agencies with expertise in these areas if the school is to adequately support the affected students, both those bullied and those carrying out the bullying. As will be clear from a later section of this submission, those supports to students and schools are frequently lacking. Cuts to pastoral supports in schools, such as guidance and middle management, have also made it difficult for schools to support students in these difficult situations. The loss of pastoral supports such as Assistant Principal positions, is a situation that the DES (2014) itself has described as “unsustainable”. Sadly little has changed, in relation to middle management posts, in the last seven years to make the situation any less “unsustainable”. In addition to more middle management posts, it would be a tremendous help if all schools, and not just DEIS schools, had a Home School Community Liaison Officer (HSCLO).

### **Bullying of School Staff**

Bullying of school staff is also a serious problem. Staff are entitled to dignity and safety in their workplace but that sometimes is not what happens. School leaders and teachers are sometimes the subject of derogatory, and even defamatory, comment on social media sites. It is important that staff be protected. The TUI notes that legislation currently working its way through the Oireachtas would create the right to a student and parent charter. The TUI is working with other teacher unions to create a teacher charter which would make clear what rights teachers and teacher leaders have. The TUI would welcome the support of the Department of Education, and this Committee, in amending the current proposed legislation to include that teacher charter.

At the time of writing the Government has just published a new Code of Practice on workplace bullying which, according to RTE (RTE News website February 3<sup>rd</sup> 2021), “will apply whether employees work at fixed locations, remotely or are mobile”. The same news report also noted that *“the document cites bullying behaviours including social exclusion or isolation, verbal abuse or insults, disseminating malicious rumours, gossip or innuendo, intimidation, excessive monitoring at work, blaming someone for things beyond their control, and use of aggressive or obscene language”*

and that “the Code of Practice also addresses the rise in cyber-bullying”. As of time of writing the TUI hasn’t yet had the opportunity to look into this matter in detail but welcomes the general thrust of the plan and would be interested in knowing more about it and whether it applies to education workplaces.

### **The Need for Adequately Resourced Support Services for Students and Schools**

Schools rely heavily on support agencies, especially when working with students experiencing crisis. Vulnerable students require the presence of ex quota guidance teachers but also other specialist agencies. Guidance staff in schools, and principal teachers, often find it very difficult to access outside support when needed as the agencies themselves are under significant pressure.

Many of these support services are vital if a student who is suffering bullying is to be adequately supported. However, through no fault of the staff in the agencies, there are often

significant waiting lists. Caseloads for agency staff are often unmanageable. For example, in 2015, less than half of the recommended 127 specialist Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) teams had been established, 472 children in care did not have a social worker, 673 children in care did not have a care plan whilst there are 8,161 child protection cases which had not been allocated a social worker including 2,829 deemed 'high priority' (Children's Rights Alliance, 2015). In March 2018, 2,691 children and young adults were waiting for a CAMHS appointment, including 386 who were waiting more than 12 months and 128 who were waiting more than 18 months (Irish Times September 10<sup>th</sup>, 2018). In January 2019 the situation was only very slightly better with 2,523 children on a HSE CAMHS waiting list (PSI, 2019). The Inspector of Mental Health Services has stated that only 49% of HSE mental health rehabilitation teams have been established (RTE, 10<sup>th</sup> October 2019). Mental health services overall are short 2,422 whole time equivalents (WTEs) on what government policy said in 2006 was needed (12,354 based on the 2016 census) and some areas, including much of Dublin, have "less than half the staff" deemed to be necessary (Irish Times, December 28<sup>th</sup> 2019). As noted in a study in Dublin by McCarthy Quinn and Comiskey (2019: 69) only a small number of young people suffering severe emotional stress "are in contact with an agency that can assist, there is known to be a hidden cohort of young people who are not visible to the health services".

In November 2018, 37,473 children were "in some health queue waiting for an assessment for mental health, disability or speech and language problems" (Irish Independent Nov 28<sup>th</sup>, 2018). Schools are trying to support a child in accessing speech and language therapy for example (Irish Examiner, September 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2014). Children's Rights Alliance (2018) highlights the 314 children who have been waiting over one year for a speech and language therapy assessment. Furthermore, according to the Childcare Law Reporting Project, in relation to applications for secure care – where a child is detained in a special unit providing specialised care and education where they have very high needs - there are 26 secure care beds in the State "and only 14 of them are available mainly due to staffing problems" (Irish Times, January 13<sup>th</sup> 2020). In February 2020, a review by the Mental Health Commission concluded that there was "an almost total absence" of community mental health services across the State (RTE News February 19<sup>th</sup> 2020).

The Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (IHREC) has, on a number of occasions, outlined its concerns about inadequate community adolescent mental health services. Indeed, IHREC (2019: 28) stated clearly that

*“There were 6,811 children awaiting a psychology appointment across all Community Healthcare Organisations at the end of July 2017, of which 2,186 were waiting more than a year. There is no primary care psychology service to refer children to in North Dublin.”*

In January 2019, there were 29 vacant posts of child and adolescent psychiatrists across the country (RTE News, February 1<sup>st</sup>, 2019). Furthermore, in a study of 33 countries, Ireland had the seventh highest ratio of students to school psychologists i.e. 5,298:1 as opposed to 927:1 in Denmark for example (Jimerson et al., 2009). The average in the study was 3,709:1. For Ireland to reach reasonable rate of 2500 students per psychologist, taking into account demographic group, would require the employment of 267 more psychologists by 2021 (Impact, 2015). Understaffing in National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) has also been a concern in an Oireachtas Committee report (2018). In 2017, there were 2,767 children waiting for a first appointment with CAMHS whilst Ireland has the fourth highest incidence of teenage suicide in the European Union (Children’s Rights Alliance, 2018). OCO (2018:4) made clear that it is “concerned with staffing problems in the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services which means that children experiencing escalating levels of stress and anxiety are often unable to access the emergency supports they need.” Two years later OCO (2020: 21) found that “waiting lists for Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) remain high, with 2,300 children waiting for an appointment at end of December 2019.”

As stated in 2020 by Paul Downes of the Education Research Centre

*“In France, all pupils have access to the Psychologist of Education for psychological support and career guidance. Emotional counselling is also available in Sweden, where all students have access to a school doctor, school nurse, psychologist and school welfare officer at no cost and in Slovenia.”*

The Committee will be aware that such a level of provision is still a far-away dream for Irish educators.

This is all within the context that during 2014, the then Tusla Chief Executive publicly stated that the Agency required additional funding of €45 million “just to stand still” (Irish Times, December 30<sup>th</sup>, 2014). Indeed, Tusla (2018) stated that “while additional funding has been agreed for 2018, significant additional funding will be required for 2019 and 2020”. Budget 2019 did give Tusla an increase in its budget of €30m to €786m (Irish Examiner October 9<sup>th</sup> 2018) but gaps remain. As recently as March 2018, Tusla was short almost three hundred social workers (TheJournal.ie March 28<sup>th</sup>, 2018) and more than 4,000 children who were referred to protection and welfare services were waiting to be allocated a social worker (Irish Independent March 29<sup>th</sup>, 2018). In 2018 Tusla recruited 150 social workers, but in the same time frame lost 150 social workers through resignation or retirement (Oireachtas, 2019). This was slightly improved in 2020 by way of converting agency staff to Tusla employees.

Concerns about mental health, and the adequacy or otherwise of support services have also been expressed in Reilly (2015), Mental Health Reform (2018), Mental Health Commission (2018) and RCSI (2013). The Programme for Government 2016-2018 promised 238 psychologists in NEPS by 2018. In October 2018 there were only 172 wholetime equivalents in post (DES, 2018c). The Committee will note from page six of this submission that Impact (2015) made clear six years ago that 267 “more” psychologists were needed, not 172 in total. As noted earlier, student numbers in 2020 are considerably higher now than in 2015 – by c.16,000 in primary schools and 26,000 in post-primary schools (DE, 2020b).

RTE News (September 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2018) reported that less than 10% of the number of staff required for CAMHS intellectual disabilities were in place. In October 2018, 36,531 people were waiting for speech and language therapy (SLT) with a further 32,103 waiting for occupational therapy (OT). One-quarter of those waiting for an OT assessment had been waiting more than a year (Sunday Independent, December 16<sup>th</sup>, 2018). According to the Mental Health Commission (2020: 17), there are only “98 CAMHS beds nationally: 62 in Dublin, 20 in Galway

and 16 in Cork.” The DES (2020:3) itself has stated that “the number of referrals (to CAMHS) for 2018 was 18,546 compared to 12,800 in 2011”. TASC (2020: 2) has stated that *“Medical health supports are also highly understaffed, with the Psychological Society of Ireland in September 2019 reporting a waiting list of 6,300 children for primary-care assessments and a waiting list of 3,345 adults for counselling (McDaid, 2020).”*

School Completion programmes have been stripped back and the lack of standardisation of SCP roles means vital supports to students and schools are being lost. Cuts to the SCP programme amount to approximately one-quarter of its pre-recession budget (Irish Times, April 22<sup>nd</sup> 2017).

### **Recommendations**

The TUI would like to make the following recommendations to the Committee:

- There should be formal government recognition for the teacher charter which the teacher unions are currently working on.
- It is essential that vital support structures within schools be restored. This includes, but is not limited to, guidance support and middle management posts.
- Significant investment is needed in out of school supports such as CAMHS.
- Whilst recent changes in guidance provision (Circular 12/2017) and middle management posts (Circular 3/2018) are a small step in supporting students in difficulty, a much larger move in terms of full restoration of both is needed.
- Every school should have a HSCL.

**Ends**

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## **Glossary**

CAMHS	Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service
C&C	Community and Comprehensive
CSO	Central Statistics Office
DCYA	Department of Children and Youth Affairs (Now DCEDIYA)
DE	Department of Education
DEIS	Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools
DES	Department of Education and Skills (Now DE)
ESRI	Economic and Social Research Institute
ETB	Education and Training Board
EU	European Union
HEA	Higher Education Authority
HSCL	Home School Community Liaison
IHREC	Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission
NAPD	National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals
NEPS	National Educational Psychological Service
NERI	Nevin Economic Research Institute
OCO	Ombudsman for Children's Office
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OT	Occupational Therapy
PSI	Psychological Society of Ireland
RCSI	Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland
RTE	Raidio Teilifis Eireann

SCP	School Completion Programme
SJI	Social Justice Ireland
SLT	Speech and Language Therapy
TASC	Think-tank for Action on Social Change
TUI	Teachers' Union of Ireland
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
WTE	Whole Time Equivalent

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