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NPCpp – Working towards a better education system for all

Written submission to the Joint Committee on Education and Skills on the topic of sexual health and relationship education, including matters relating to contraception and consent

Committee members,

The National Parents Council Post Primary (NPCpp) are grateful to the joint Committee for the opportunity to make this submission on behalf of parents of students attending post-primary schools in Ireland.

The purpose of the review is to examine how

- Information on sexual health and relationship education, including matters relating to contraception and consent can be delivered within our schools and
- How content and delivery of information related to the wider issues of healthy/positive sexual expression of relationships, LGBTQ + issues can be promoted

NPCpp propose to address the following areas in our submission:

- The elements acknowledged to bring about high implementation of RSE within our schools
- A one off poll in the Journal.ie
- The case for teaching consent at post primary
- A change in perspective for the future

Directors: P. Rolston, P. Beddy, E. Bell, S. Bennet, J. Carr, B. Dennehy, M. Fanning, R. Hemeryck, D. Hogan, C. Kelly, R. MacMahon, A. Mulligan, J. Murphy, G. O'Hara, S. O'Riordan, M. O'Shea.

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The elements acknowledged to bring about high implementation of RSE with our schools

We feel there must be reference to the existing programmes currently active in our schools. In commenting on the introduction of an enhanced or changed programme for SPHE/RSE it must be acknowledged that the success of such additional information being delivered to students can be measured to some extent by the success of the delivery of existing programmes.

In 2007 An Assessment of the Challenges to Full Implementation of RSE in the Context of SPHE Programme in Post-primary Schools was reported on. This was undertaken three years following the full implementation of the RSE programme in 2003. This report highlighted a number of barriers to the implementation of the program and a number of factors that would help in the implementation of the program. While this report was over 10 years ago, experience on the ground tells us, as parents, that little has changed in the implementation this program and in the program itself, while much has changed for the students in receipt of this program.

In 2007 Barriers to this program were

	% of schools agreeing
The overcrowded curriculum	82%
The need to complete so many courses in so many subjects	71%
Discomfort of some teachers in teaching RSE	71%
The pressure of examination subjects	67%

Table 4 Factors that would help 'a lot' or 'somewhat' in implementation of the RSE programme in post-primary schools

	% of schools agreeing
An expanded SPHE Support Service	87%
Increased in-service provision	84%
More outside facilitators in schools	80%
Greater involvement of parents	58%
Changes in the RSE programme	37%

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This report also detailed the elements which brought about a high level of implementation of the RSE programme. These elements are still relevant ten years later and are, by in large, a matter of common sense and a realistic investment in the delivery of any programme.

Co-ordination of SPHE/ RSE: Schools with a successful or high rate of implementation had a committed SPHE co-ordinator who worked with SPHE teachers and the entire staff to prioritise SPHE and RSE. The coordination of SPHE was designated as a Post of Responsibility by school management within the school.

Parental involvement: Parents were consulted at the time of drawing up the RSE policy and were regularly informed about the content of RSE.

Status: SPHE/RSE was prioritised and valued by all staff members. The subject enjoyed status in the planning of school 'business' generally and also among the students.

Teacher training: A pool of well-equipped teachers using experiential learning methodologies for RSE. The School also provided additional funding for staff wide training. Teachers used personal time to train in SPHE/RSE and there was a high level of access to extra training services.

Teacher comfort: Teacher comfort is an essential point. When teachers were uncomfortable and unsure of what they were teaching or how they should teach the programme the school experiences a reduced success rate of implementation. Where the school confronted RSE issues in a positive manner teachers had more confidence and comfort with the delivery. Teachers in schools with a high implementation rate were trained in facilitating openness and confidentiality amongst students. They also showed a personal level of confidence in negotiating any ethos issues. They were supported by a clear RSE policy, school management, and a clear and open relationship with parents.

Clarity among teachers about what can be taught: Teachers were confident about the boundaries of acceptability within RSE teaching and moved comfortably through all aspects of the RSE programme in accordance with the school's RSE policy.

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Student perspectives and understanding: Students have confidence in their RSE teachers and enjoy RSE classes. They are reasonably or very satisfied with the programme content and generally feel comfortable and able to discuss relationships and sexuality. Students are consulted about RSE policy and the programme, possibly through the mechanism of the Students' Council.

Whole-school support: A large number of staff trained in SPHE/RSE. High level of openness and flexibility around RSE teaching and timetabling. Regular planning and evaluation of RSE progress, sharing of ideas, and 'moral support'. Actively and explicitly outlining to parents how RSE is taught.

These would be clear indicators as to some of the resources, supports and strategies that would need to be in place for the successful introduction of any content.

In particular we feel the following factors are essential

- Teacher comfort and knowledge
- Parental involvement
- Student Involvement
- An agreed RSE policy
- Priority and planning

In the schools with a low implementation rate it was found that fundamentally teachers avoided teaching the subject due to personal discomfort with the topic of sexuality. Teachers were extremely nervous about the topics they could 'safely' address and consequently avoided certain or all aspects of RSE teaching. This resulted in students feeling that teachers were disinterested in and uncomfortable with RSE.

Parents also feel that programmes delivered by individuals external to the school can bring about a more positive and open delivery of this type of programme.

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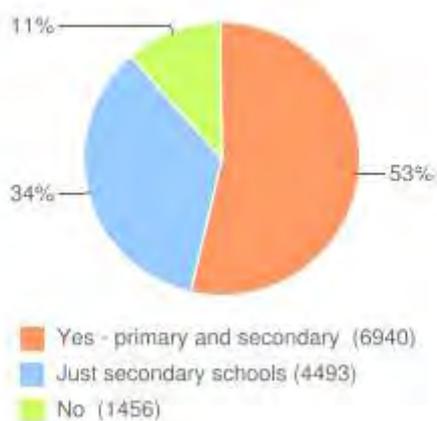
A one off poll in the Journal.ie

In a recent survey the Journal.ie asked the question: **Do you think schools should teach about consent?**

There were 12,889 responses to this survey with only 11% against the teaching of consent in schools. 34% were in favour of teaching consent at second level only but the majority, 53%, were in favour of teaching consent at both primary and secondary level.

Poll Results:

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While this is a 'pop-up' survey, without means to validate the responses, it is an indicator of a positive reaction to the teaching of consent in schools.

The case for teaching consent at Post Primary

There has been a steady introduction of Consent classes at third level, some compulsory, some facilitated by the colleges and some facilitated by student unions. Students attending these have expressed the opinion that third level is too late as the age of consent is 17 and a percentage of students do not attend third level.

Technology and access to instant and extensive information has impacted on the type of content we now need to deliver in any health related subject in our schools. The many advances in media and the manner in which programmes are now streamed into homes

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mean that young people receive informal and unsupervised information about relationships and sexuality outside of the classroom setting. Young people are already exposed to a variety of sexual practices and attitudes through the media, particularly social media, television, film and magazines from a relatively young age.

Social media has changed the way young people relate to each other. It has also meant that students at a young age are sharing inappropriate images of a personal nature with each other.

We know that children access pornography at a much younger age because of the internet and the recent “Net Children go Mobile” report confirmed that over 21% of children had seen sexual images either on or off line in the past 12 months. The type of content being viewed is influencing young people’s sexuality and influencing their expectation of what the relationships within a sexual relationship should be.

A Special Eurobarometer, Gender-based Violence Report published in November 2016 highlighted disturbing attitudes. This survey presented a series of different situations to respondents and examined whether any of these can ever justify sexual intercourse without consent.

More than one in four respondents think sexual intercourse without consent can be justifiable. Overall, 27% say sexual intercourse without consent may be justified in at least one of the situations proposed. Respondents are most likely to say this about being drunk or on drugs (12%), voluntarily going home with someone (11%), wearing revealing, provocative or sexy clothing or not clearly saying no or physically fighting back (both 10%). This was a European study and included Ireland.

The ability to give consent is also relevant. The Sexual Health and Attitudes, Galway (SHAG) Report was carried out by Elaine Byrnes, doctoral researcher, and Dr Padraig MacNeela of the School of Psychology at NUIG. Data from 1,691 participants was analysed for the report, with women accounting for more than two-thirds of the respondents, while 53% were single, 46% were in a relationship, and 1% were married or divorced.

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One aspect covered in the survey was the role of alcohol — 76% of females and 69% of males agreed they are less nervous about sex after drinking, while 35% of females and 58% of males agreed they had sex with people with whom they wouldn't if sober. It also found that 31.5% of females and 57% of males find it harder to say “no” to sexual advances after drinking.

The extent of alcohol consumption also influenced some results: 43% of female and 39% of male frequent binge drinkers reported regretted sexual experiences, compared to 25% of female and 31% of male infrequent binge drinkers, 12% of female and 13% of male rare binge drinkers, and just 3% of both females and males who never engaged in binge drinking. Among issues relating to consent, the report found that 50% of females and 58% of males agreed or strongly agreed that they would just keep moving forward in sexual behaviours or actions unless their partner stopped them. It also found that 12.5% of females and 2.5% of males reported ever having experienced sexual contact where physical force or threats to physically harm them were used, while 20% of females and 5% of males reported ever having experienced sexual contact being attempted using physical force, or threatening to cause physical harm that was not successful.

A change in perspective for the future

NPCpp feel that positive reinforcement should be the method employed in teaching these issues to students as opposed to the negative, i.e. don't talk to strangers, don't dress in a particular way, don't drink alcohol, don't share pictures, etc. We need to teach our children to be aware of what they are saying 'Yes' to.

We should be helping pupils gain skills and resources that lead to personal development. We need to help them to improve their self-concept and personal interaction skills. Parents know from raising their own children that a focus on confidence building and knowledge are the core to responsible choices in life.

The world is moving so fast that parents and teachers need ongoing training and education themselves to keep up with requirements to educate and protect our children. It is

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incumbent on All educators - teachers, schools, DES, parents and youth clubs to work together to ensure that the required 'education for life' is delivered properly and effectively to our children.

Common sense and statistics tell us that education on alcohol is a significant part of any education on consent. This demonstrates that we should move away from a narrow definition for any planned education programme. Consent is a broad subject and is relevant to all areas of a student's life.

Peer pressure, the pressure of fitting in and the influence of social media all need to be counteracted with the ability to establish a greater control over their own lives. Making educated and informed decisions in this area of life is the key to empowerment. Sexuality education should have an emphasis on communication skills, negotiation skills and problem solving skills. Our students need to be socially cognitive and empowered to make their own decisions in all personal aspects of their lives and have the ability to resist enforced pressure from others.

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