

The Counselling in Primary Schools Pilot

A landmark initiative of counselling and wellbeing supports

Introduction and research

Nationally and internationally, there is growing concern about children's mental health and wellbeing. Demand has increased for services to support these needs, particularly since the Covid-19 pandemic. This article highlights recent research and outlines some steps the Department of Education is taking to address these concerns.

In a Growing Up in Ireland study (Nixon, 2021), 7% of children were categorised as having social-emotional and behavioural difficulties at both 9 and 13 years. The study said these were the group we should be most concerned about, as their difficulties were likely becoming more entrenched. Children in Second Class were found to have higher levels of worry and anxiety in 2023 than in 2019, and their anxiety levels increase as they progress through primary school (Sloan et al., 2024).

There is an emerging body of literature on the efficacy of school-based interventions to support children's mental health and wellbeing (Sanchez et al., 2018; Grant et al., 2021; Finning et al., 2022). There is also growing evidence that young people's mental health is linked to educational success. Students experiencing any type of mental health difficulty are more likely to experience learning difficulties and to underperform academically (Cefai & Cavioni, 2015; Agnafors et al., 2021). Most importantly, early intervention brings many advantages, including preventing problems becoming entrenched, reducing the burden on children and their families, and reducing the costs of treating mental health disorders (Clarke et al., 2022).

Department of Education's response

The Department of Education recognises the key role of schools in promoting mental health and wellbeing for



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Nationally and internationally, there is growing concern about the mental health and wellbeing of children. Demand has increased for services to support these needs, particularly since the Covid-19 pandemic. This article outlines recent research and some of the steps the Department of Education is taking to address these concerns, in particular highlighting two strands of the Counselling in Primary Schools Pilot 2023–2025.

children and young people. It has a broad range of policies, action plans, and services to support the wellbeing and mental health of school communities. The *Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice* (DES, 2019) aims to mitigate young people's mental health challenges and to promote the wellbeing of the whole school community.

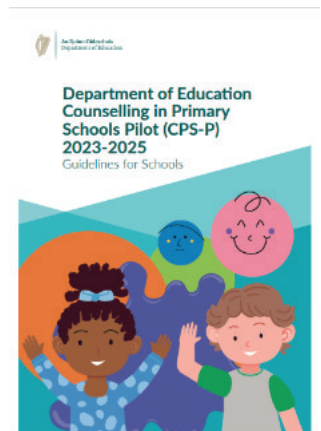
Aligned with this are a number of supports offered to schools to promote wellbeing and mental health, including *Cineáltas: Action Plan on Bullying*, support from Oide (the teacher professional learning service), the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS), and guidance counsellors at post-primary level. Jigsaw this year has been engaged to work with the Department to further support wellbeing and mental health in post-primary schools.

In May 2023 the Minister for Education announced the establishment of a €5 million investment in piloting a landmark programme of counselling and wellbeing supports for primary schools, which will run until 2025. Schools in pilot areas have warmly welcomed the two distinct strands of the Counselling in Primary Schools Pilot (CPS-P) 2023–2025.

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The Counselling in Primary Schools Pilot

In developing the pilot, the Department, through NEPS, conducted a synthesis of selected theory and research on supporting mental health and wellbeing in schools. The research indicates that schools require a flexible approach to meeting children's different needs. Such a continuum of support includes psycho-education to promote wellbeing and prevent mental health difficulties, alongside targeted, group, and individualised early intervention to address specific difficulties when they arise. Two distinct strands to the Counselling in Primary Schools Pilot were developed.



Strand 1 is the provision of one-to-one counselling to support small numbers of children in all primary and special schools in Longford, Leitrim, Laois, Mayo, Monaghan, Tipperary, and Cavan. Schools are allocated blocks of up to six counselling sessions per child, and county panels of preapproved private counsellors provide the counselling in the schools. A child is prioritised for counselling after a period of school-based intervention with evidence that, following intervention, the child has not made adequate progress. NEPS psychologists are supporting schools to identify and prioritise children to access the counselling, subject to consent from the parent/guardian. The counselling

sessions with children are bookended by a pre- and post-session meeting with parents/carers and relevant school staff.

The counselling service provided under the pilot is not a substitute for HSE Primary Care Psychology or Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) led by the Department of Health. The pilot is an interim measure intended to supplement these services while demand for support remains high.

Strand 2 sees the establishment of education wellbeing teams to support schools in cluster areas in Cork, Carlow, Dublin 7, and Dublin 16. Twenty practitioners work under the direction and supervision of lead NEPS psychologists. The wellbeing team is an innovative approach to provide enhanced in-school support. The practitioners support the schools to strengthen their whole-school preventative approach to promoting wellbeing and mental health, in line with the Department's wellbeing policy. They provide psycho-educational support for parents, school staff, and pupils, and preventative, evidence-based interventions to prevent mild and emerging social and emotional difficulties. Strand 2 is being delivered with Cork Education and Training Board as a strategic partner.

The pilot aims to ensure that children in participating primary schools are provided with responsive supports to allow them to reach their educational potential and experience improved wellbeing. Through the pilot and subsequent evaluation, the Department will gather valuable learning that will inform future policy and a roadmap for future provision.

The wellbeing team is an innovative approach to provide enhanced in-school support.

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Dublin City Council introduces Communications Boards in Libraries



Libraries staff, including City Librarian Mairead Owens, with the Communications Boards and AAC devices

Dublin City Council is pleased to announce that it has introduced Communications Boards in some of its libraries, making it the first public library service in the country to do so.

The Communications Boards and augmentative and alternative communications (AAC) devices are of particular benefit to children or adults who are either pre-verbal or non-verbal and/or have communication difficulties.

The Communications Boards were designed in association with Finding Charlie's Voice, a charity addressing the barriers facing children with speech and language needs.

The AAD devices include Lightwriters, which are text to speech devices, and TD I-110 devices, which are touch screen speech-generating devices.