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Committee for Education

Addressing Bullying in Schools Bill – Committee Stage scrutiny

I. SUMMARY

Early Years – the organisation for young children warmly welcomes this opportunity to submit evidence to the Committee's scrutiny of the Addressing Bullying in Schools Bill. During 2015-16 the organisation is celebrating 50 years of working to promote and develop high quality, evidence-informed, cross community early childhood services for young children, their families and communities.

We have successfully worked in all communities, including some of the most divided interface areas in Northern Ireland, in delivering projects and activities relating to child focused community based health and education; tackling social and educational inequalities; working with young Traveller children and their families; shared spaces, community development and working with children, practitioners, management boards, parents and carers to develop a culture of respect to the various forms of difference in our society

This submission, in the advancement of draft Bill, welcomes in principle a number of elements contained in the draft Bill, queries some of the terminology presently utilised and ultimately emphasises the following:

- Adopting an approach beginning at the earliest levels of education and building on this consistently up through the tiers of the education pathway
- Embracing an ecological approach actively incorporating wider support networks involving parents, families and all communities as well as staff and leadership within schools and education providers
- Utilisation of current best practice and evidence locally and internationally

1.	INTRODUCTION
1.1	Early Years – the organisation for young children ¹ is the largest voluntary organisation working with and for all young children 0-12 in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. It is a non-profit making organisation and during 2015-16 is celebrating 50 years of working to promote and develop high quality, evidence-informed, cross community early childhood services for young children, their families and communities.
1.2	Our vision is that children are strong, competent and visible in their communities; physically and emotionally healthy; eager and able to learn and respectful of difference. Members of Early Years across the statutory, community, voluntary and independent sectors support the child care and early education needs of over 30,000 children on a daily basis. We also have a leadership role in ten Sure Start projects supporting 15,000 children 0-4 and their families. Our projects and activities relate to child focused community based health and education; tackling social and educational inequalities; working with young Traveller children and their families; community development and working with children, practitioners, management boards, parents and carers to respect the various forms of difference in our society.
2	Terminology in the draft Bill
2.1	The intention of the draft Bill to provide an inclusive definition of ‘bullying’; introduce a duty to secure measures to prevent bullying; and introduce a duty to keep a record of incidents of bullying is welcomed.
2.2	We would also wish to make a more general comment on the terminology used in, and also the required focus of, the Bill. Throughout the draft document reference is made to ‘schools’ or ‘grant-aided schools’.
2.3	However, experience has taught us that this inevitably leads to an assumption that the fundamental stage before formal school commencement, of which the Department has a significant role in, is not worthy of consideration.
2.4	Based on domestic and international evidence and practice it is vital that any initiatives embrace an ecological framework approach beginning in the earliest years and continuing through primary and secondary education levels. In developing a positive sense of self and others it is essential to address issues of inclusion and exclusion from an early age. It is well documented in early childhood research that children as young as three years old are aware of difference and by age six can develop negative attitudes and behaviour towards others who are different (Too Young to Notice? The Cultural and Political

¹ For more see <http://www.early-years.org/>

	Awareness of 3-6 Year Olds in Northern Ireland Connolly, P., Smith, A. & Kelly, B. 2002). Specific reference to the important pre-school phase of the education pathway should also be included in this document, the ultimate policy and any associated guidance.
3.	Monitoring, recording, and required training
3.1	In terms of monitoring and recording of incidents it will be essential moving forward that this aspect does not merely in practice become one where there is an undue focus on adhering to required procedures rather than on the significance of meaningful engagement.
3.2	We would also add to this the importance of associated anti-bullying, cultural awareness and diversity training, ongoing support and age and stage appropriate resources and in these respects offer the good practice example of the robustly evaluated Media Initiative for Children (MIFC) Respecting Difference Programme (for more see http://www.early-years.org/mifc/). This programme also reflects the importance of beginning in the earliest levels of the education pathway and building up and promoting a culture of respect for difference with children, practitioners, management committees and boards and family members.
3.3	The MIFC Respecting Difference Programme, developed by Early Years and the Peace Initiatives Institute, is currently linked to relevant curricula for children aged from two to eight years in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland and consideration is being given to further development of the programme covering the timeframe right through to the end of primary school. The programme incorporates a range of messages associated with acceptance and respect for those from different traditions, the traveller community, minority ethnic communities, disability/physical difference and a specific message around bullying behaviours. Through the work of the project, the support provided to implement the programme and the associated development of age and stage appropriate pre-school, school and Irish medium training and resources settings are also very much encouraged to develop cross community and cross border partnerships.
3.4	Many elements associated with the MIFC Respecting Difference programme make clear links into the pre-school and primary curriculum by addressing such themes as self-awareness, similarities and differences, relationships and feelings and emotions. The key strengths of the programme are that it places a strong emphasis on promoting socio-emotional development as the foundation upon which diversity work can be undertaken and it looks at diversity and inclusion in all its aspects focusing on ability, race, cultural ethnic and religious identity through age appropriate programmes.

3.5	<p>The programme looks first at sameness before addressing difference. The children see the points of similarity and subsequently the points of difference. This serves as an ideal practical approach to encourage the development of empathy, understand helpful and hurtful behaviours, promote self-regulation, avoid labelling and to see a situation from another's perspective. The programme also clearly contributes to not only respecting difference in the classroom but also at home by embracing that much needed holistic and child-rights centered approach, in recognition of the various circles of influence that a child encounters in their daily life, through implementation of such aspects as teacher training, parent workshops, Management Committee/Board of Governors training and ongoing support. This approach realises a range of outcomes at different levels including the children's own attitudes and behaviours towards difference; practitioners' or governors' understanding of or capacity around difference and diversity work and parents' appreciation of diversity issues and confidence to address this with their children and others across communities.</p>
3.6	<p>Many of the above principles, particularly relating to supporting social and emotional development, understanding children's temperaments, conflict resolution, self-regulation and connecting with children in partnership with teachers, practitioners and family members as a vitally important foundation for all learning and overall well-being, are also clearly reflected in the HighScope approach implemented by Early Years as the base of the HighScope Ireland Institute (for more see http://www.early-years.org/highscope/). HighScope provides children with opportunities to engage in an active participatory learning process; to develop self-confidence, initiative, creativity and problem-solving skills; to learn about social relationships and to develop positive attitudes to self, others and future learning.</p>
3.7	<p>A further key message from both of the above approaches is the importance of focusing both on the child who is the recipient of the behaviour and as well as the child initiating the behaviour, who needs the support as much as the other if not more.</p>
4	Departmental Guidance
4.1	<p>The draft Bill states that the Department may from time to time publish guidance on this area. It would be imperative that such guidance reflects and is influenced by reference to anti-bullying responses/approaches in other jurisdictions. One such example is provided through a KiVa program, developed at the University of Turku in Finland with funding from the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture (http://www.kivaprogram.net/program). KiVa is an innovative evidence-based anti-bullying program which has been developed using cutting-edge research on bullying and its mechanisms and focuses on prevention, intervention and monitoring.</p>

4.2	The effects of the KiVa anti-bullying program have been evaluated in studies both based on data collected and analysed internally and independent data collected by the National Institute for Health and Welfare indicates that bullying and victimization have decreased in Finland since the broad rollout of the KiVa program. KiVa is also being evaluated in several other countries including the Netherlands, Estonia, Italy, and Wales are emerging, showing that KiVa is effective outside of Finland as well.
5	Expression of interest in the further submission of evidence
5.1	Early Years welcomes this opportunity to submit written evidence. The organisation would also be willing to further participate in the process by giving oral evidence to the Committee on anything contained in this submission.