

Response by the NSPCC Northern Ireland to the document: Every School A Good School: A policy for school improvement.

March 2008

Introduction

The NSPCC is the UK's leading charity specialising in child protection and the prevention of cruelty to children. The NSPCC considers that everyone has responsibility for safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children and young people: children and young people have a right to be safe and happy in the activities that they or their parents choose. Parents have a right to believe that individuals or organisations to which they entrust their children and young people are safe.

Our role is to:

- prevent children and young people from suffering significant harm as a result of cruelty;
- help children and young people who are at risk of such harm;
- help children and young people who have suffered cruelty to overcome its effects; and
- work to protect children and young people from further harm.

The NSPCC has more than 180 teams and projects throughout England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Our work includes:

- family support, assessment, counselling and therapy to children, young people and families experiencing maltreatment;
- Work with children who sexually harm and in provision of regional Young Witnesses Services;
- investigations into allegations of child maltreatment;
- Services to safeguard the welfare of children through Child Protection in Sport;
- work within schools and youth organisations to support children and young people who have unmet emotional needs, provide a voice for children and young people and advocate their rights; and
- policy development, campaigns and research

The aim of our FULL STOP Campaign is to end cruelty to children. The NSPCC believes that, given the will, most cruelty can be prevented. In order to achieve this, it is vital that all children and young people, whatever their needs, have a range of services that are flexible and offer them support and protection.

The NSPCC's comments on this consultation document are based on our expertise and practice in safeguarding children and young people and promoting their welfare, in our projects and services in Northern Ireland. Comments will be made with regard to those consultation points relevant to our area of expertise.

The NSPCC welcomes the document '*Every School A Good School*' produced by the Department of Education and its stated aim of wanting to 'deliver a high quality education, responsive to the individual needs of every one of their pupils.' We commend the Department in their efforts to ensure that 'all pupils... are given the opportunity to achieve their full potential and to develop the skills, knowledge and self confidence to make a unique and positive contribution to society and the economy'. **We are however concerned at the emphasis in this document on improving academic achievement and performance to the relative neglect of promoting the development of the whole child.**

Consultation point 1

The NSPCC agrees that these are the essential characteristics of a good school. We commend the recognition of the fact that good support systems need to be developed and appropriate interventions adopted when required and hope that this refers to the need to prioritise the mental and emotional health needs of pupils.

Teachers have long understood that young people bring a multiplicity of problems into the classroom and that this affects their ability to engage with the curriculum in a purposeful way. The most recently published epidemiological data relating to the mental health of children and young

people in Great Britain indicates that one in ten children and young people aged 5-16 years have at least one diagnosed ICD-10 mental health disorder (Green et al, 2004; Meltzer, 2007). While little such epidemiological data exists on the mental health of children and young people in Northern Ireland, it is estimated that the rates of mental disorder are at least comparable to those reported for Great Britain considering the higher levels of socio-economic deprivation, ongoing civil troubles and higher rates of psychiatric morbidity in the adult population in Northern Ireland (Davern, 2007; DHSS&PS, 2006; O'Rawe, 2005). Research evidence confirms that children and young people are burdened in dealing with a range of complex social and emotional issues including domestic violence, bullying, family breakdown, child abuse and suicide (McElearney et al, 2007; Livesey et al, 2007; Dyer and Teggart, 2007; Byrne and Taylor, 2007). Children and young people experiencing emotional trauma bring this trauma to school where it influences their behaviour and capacity for academic attainment and achievement. There is a growing recognition that the resolution of mental health difficulties and the promotion of pupil wellbeing are a prerequisite to academic success. Goleman (1995) says 'Students who are anxious, angry or depressed don't learn; people who are in these states do not take in information efficiently or deal with it well...when emotions overwhelm concentration, what is being swamped is the mental capacity cognitive scientists call 'working memory', the ability to hold in mind all information relevant to the task at hand.' Recent guidance in relation to the Social Emotional Aspects of Learning programme (SEAL) within the context of the Behaviour and Attendance Strategy in England (DfES 2005) highlighted the importance of supporting pupil emotional health and wellbeing to academic engagement and attainment.

In the drive towards greater achievement it is important that we do not forget what is at the core of a child's education: a concern for a child's development in the widest sense. It is essential that children and young people are appropriately supported if they are to succeed and achieve academically. Empirically supported mental health promotion and 'someone to turn to' type services in schools has been associated with improved emotional and

behavioural functioning (Horner and Sugai, 2000) and academic achievement (Knoff and Batsche 1995, Smith 2006). Efforts to assess how the school meets the mental health needs of its pupils and **the availability of appropriate support services within the school must therefore be acknowledged as one of the characteristics of a good school.**

Consultation point 3

The NSPCC commend the collaborative responsibility involved in a 'whole school' approach as one of the key principles of the new school improvement policy. It has been the experience of the NSPCC that schools which adopt such approaches value all children and young people, reflected in and conveyed by the ethos and relationships, the taught curriculum, the setting and environment as well as community and parental involvement, are more effective in supporting children and young people. Smith (2006) found that the focused attention of a trusted adult providing children with opportunities to communicate, lead to children disclosing child protection issues and had a positive impact on children's academic progress.

Consultation point 7

The NSPCC commend the Department of Education for their aspirations to involve parents and the community in the life of the school. We would suggest however that efforts are not solely concentrated on extending the school day by providing clubs and activities at the start and end of the school day. The Extended Schools programme provides an opportunity for schools to engage positively and actively with neighbouring schools and statutory and voluntary and community sector organisations operating in the local community to develop and deliver better services to meet the needs of the pupils in the school, their families and the community as a whole. It is best practice that schools engage in assessment of need and tailor services to meet this assessed need. The extended school should place a particular emphasis on integrating and partnering services such as social, health and childcare services. Such services should enable children to improve their life chances and achieve their potential and should provide the opportunity for swift and easy referral to a wide range of specialist support services such as

social and health services, which may be available on the school premises, or located nearby and support for families including opportunities for training in parenting skills and supporting their children's learning.

We would suggest the Department should also promote pupil participation in the life of the school. In consultation point 1 the Department acknowledged that the 'direct involvement of pupils in the life and work of the school' was one of the characteristics of a successful school. **The Department therefore should set out the actions which will promote their involvement.**

The participation of children and young people should involve their views and ideas being taken seriously so that they can have a greater influence over matters that affect them in the school setting. Meaningful participation recognises and supports this important contribution, enabling their voices to be heard, leading to change. For the children and young people, the process acknowledges their important role in the school and society whilst helping them to gain new skills and knowledge and build their confidence in other processes, including democracy. For the school, genuine participation helps make sure that policies, programmes and services are influenced and shaped by actual rather than perceived needs.

Participation is a right of every child. Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) requires that children have the right to express their opinions in all matters affecting them and to have those views taken seriously in the decision making process. Article 19 of the Education and Libraries Order (NI) 2003 requires school Principals and Governors to consult pupils and parents on changes to all discipline policies and, in particular, the school's Anti-Bullying Policy.

Schools could enhance the participation of children and young people by establishing a school council or by establishing a peer support scheme. There has been a growth in the development of peer support programmes in school in recent years with a particular emphasis on their role in challenging bullying behaviour and inter-personal conflict among peers (Boulton, 2005). Such

programmes build on the natural willingness of children and young people of a similar age and social context to help one another in a formal setting, such as school, and facilitate a structure to develop and use interpersonal skills within safe boundaries (Childline, 2003; Baginsky, 2001; Cowie and Sharp, 1996). Peer support can be defined as interventions that harness children and young people's potential to assume a helpful role in tackling interpersonal problems in the peer group, offering a system of assistance where the potential to be helpful can be fostered through appropriate training and through the support of regular debriefing sessions (Cowie, 2004).

Consultation point 10

The initial set of indicators for '*Every School A Good School*' should acknowledge the points made in this response at Consultation point 7 which emphasises the importance of schools giving consideration to the provision of a range of integrated health and social services as opposed to a range of 'extra- curricular activities'.

Prompted by concerns about the frequency of suicide among young people, the Department of Education recently established the Pupil Emotional Health And Wellbeing (PEHAW) programme to consider the promotion of good emotional health and wellbeing for all young people within the post primary school and on how current good practice might be extended and improved. This is a positive development and '*Every School A Good School*' **should acknowledge schools' efforts and ability to promote the mental and emotional wellbeing of children and young people by including this aspect as one of the indicators set out in this document ensuring that the PEHAW initiative is integrated into the School Improvement Programme.**

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