Guidance and Counselling in Early Childhood and School Education

Academic Guidance

Early Childhood

One of the Standards in the Síolta: the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education [1] is Transitions. The Standard states that ensuring continuity of experiences for children requires policies, procedures and practice that promote sensitive management of transitions, consistency in key relationships, liaison within and between settings, the keeping and transfer of relevant information (with parental consent), and the close involvement of parents and where appropriate, relevant professionals. Síolta provides practical suggestions for the implementation of this Standard, including procedures, materials, staff behaviour and interaction with parents.

School Education

At primary school level, while there is no formal provision, the programme of guidance is part of an integrated curriculum that includes Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE). Training for SPHE is part of initial teacher education. Psychologists of the National Educational Psychological Service [2] (NEPS) work in partnership with teachers, parents and children in identifying educational needs. They offer a range of services aimed at meeting these needs. These services include assessment and consultation with schools in supporting individual students and in supporting schools’ responses to crises.

Guidance in post-primary schools in Ireland refers to a range of learning experiences provided in a developmental sequence that assist students to develop self-management skills which will lead to effective choices and decisions about their lives. It encompasses the three separate but interlinked, areas of personal and social development, educational guidance and career guidance.

It is clear from the definitions used that Ireland views Guidance in a broad way that, to be effective, demands collaboration and, at post-primary level, on a whole-school level. In addition, it is implicitly understood that links with external agencies are essential not only to post-primary level guidance but also to lifelong guidance. Agencies include NEPS, the Health Service Executive [3] and local services such as general practitioners (doctors) and voluntary supportive bodies.

Guidance counsellors in post-primary schools and in further education are registered teachers with additional training and qualifications in guidance counselling. Their time may be divided between classroom teaching of normal school subjects, in-classroom delivery of the guidance programme and in one-to-one guidance counselling, although many are employed full-time on guidance duties. Their
work involves personal and educational guidance as well as career guidance.

In December 2011, as part of its budgetary strategy due to the economic crisis, the government announced the cessation of the ex-quota allocation for guidance from September 2012. However, career guidance posts have been restored and the current Programme for Government has committed to restore as quickly as possible the resources removed at that time. To date (October 2018) the Government has restored to schools 500 of the 600 posts involved.

The Department has further undertaken a number of initiatives to enhance career guidance provision in the education sector. A policy statement on Wellbeing 2018-2023 was introduced in July 2018 which gave a commitment to ensuring that the guidance needs of children are met. School managements will be required to allocate their guidance posts in agreeing their Whole School Guidance Plans. The guidance plan will outline the school’s approach to guidance generally and how students can be supported and assisted in making choices and successful transitions in the personal and social, educational and career areas.

In essence, guidance provision is now managed by schools from within their standard staffing schedule allocation. The requirement of the Education Act 1998 remains. This states that schools must develop a whole-school guidance plan as a means of supporting the needs of students and the requirement that guidance counsellors meet the criteria for recognition as practitioners set down by the DES. The managerial bodies of post-primary schools have published a document, Framework for Considering Provision of Guidance in Post Primary Schools – September 2012, that supports schools in their ongoing provision for guidance.

The DES recently commissioned an independent career guidance review which is being carried out by Indecon. The purpose of the review is to ensure that high quality, relevant career guidance information is provided to students from post-primary level up to further and higher education. The review is looking at the quality of information available to students and adults in relation to career guidance, the sources of this information and how the system is organised to support students and adults in this area. The report of the review is expected in late 2018.

The DES is also undertaking a review of guidance provision at third level under a Programme Recognition Framework. The aim will be to ensure the supply of well-qualified guidance counsellors for schools.

The National Centre for Guidance in Education (NCGE) is also undertaking an audit of guidance provision in schools, which should identify potential recommendations for improvement.

The NCGE is the national centre of excellence in Guidance. The NCGE, as an agency of the Department, has responsibility for informing Department policy on matters relating to Guidance. Among its current initiatives in support of Guidance in post-primary schools are the online publication of the School Guidance Handbook, the facilitation of regular meetings of the directors of courses leading to recognition as a guidance counsellor and the co-ordination of reviews of guidance provision.

In the past decade, there has been a large increase in the resources available to cater for the additional needs of students. The legal framework has been provided by legislation such as the Education Welfare Act 2000, the Equal Status Acts and the Education for Persons with EPSEN Act, 2004. The outcomes in schools, both primary and second level, have included the further development of learning support, including provision for the language needs of students for whom English is an additional language, the provision of individual time allocations (resource hours) for identified students, the employment of special needs assistants (SNAs) and the development of the
services of local special educational needs organisers (SENOs).

The transition from primary school is managed, in most cases, as part of the induction process by post-primary schools, especially through SPHE, although there is a growing consciousness of the need for collaboration between both sectors in this regard. Since the beginning of the 2012-2013 school year, for example, primary schools have been required to forward the end-of-year sixth class report cards of transferring pupils to the relevant post-primary schools. Some work on this issue has been supported by the NCGE. Other transitions, such as the transition, after three years of post-primary education, from junior cycle to the two-year or three-year senior cycle, and the transition from second-level school to further or higher education and training, are managed in the context of post-primary schools’ whole-school guidance or student-support plan.

**Psychological Counselling**

**Early Childhood**

The Early Start programme aims to develop children’s confidence in their ability to learn, to facilitate the development of appropriate learning styles and to develop their language, cognition and social/personal skills.

**School Education**

Counselling is a key part of the school guidance programme, offered on an individual or group basis as part of a developmental learning process and at moments of personal crisis. Counselling has as its objective the empowerment of students so that they can make decisions, solve problems, address behavioural issues, develop coping strategies and resolve difficulties they may be experiencing. Counselling in schools may include personal counselling, educational counselling, career counselling or combinations of these. However, the provision of therapeutic counselling by guidance counsellors is not considered to be appropriate, given that their training is not to that level of counselling and given the limited resources available. Schools are encouraged to develop referral policies that link the guidance programme to external agencies such as the Health Service Executive (HSE), the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) and to professional counselling services.

**Currents Developments - Promoting Mental Health in Education**

A current, joint initiative of the Department of Education and Skills and the Department of Health is the implementation of a national framework for the promotion of mental health and wellbeing on a whole-school basis in post-primary schools. As part of the Action Plan for Education 2016-2019 [5], The DES Strategy Statement was launched by the Minister in September 2016. The Strategy statement sets out a number of objectives and proposed actions specifically targeting the promotion of wellbeing in school communities. These include:

- Commencing, as resources permit, a national programme to support all schools to implement the Wellbeing in Post Primary Schools Guidelines for Mental Health Promotion and Suicide Prevention (2013) [6] and Wellbeing in Primary Schools Guidelines for Mental Health Promotion (2015) [7];

- Implementing the new Junior Certificate area of learning entitled Wellbeing;

- Extending the Friends and Incredible years Teacher Classroom Management Programmes to all
DEIS schools;

- Increasing the capacity of NEPS by 65 educational psychologists to deliver an enhanced educational psychological service to schools;

- Enhancing Guidance Counselling at second level;

- Undertaking an assessment of the supports to schools in areas of mental health and wellbeing with a view to providing an enhanced and better integrated service;

- Working closely with the Department of Health and others departments on the National Task Force on Youth Mental Health.

The DES promotes a comprehensive and whole-school approach in schools to the promotion of positive mental health focusing on the entire school community, as well as groups and individual young people with identified need. This spans the curriculum in schools, whole-school ethos, quality of teaching, learning and assessment, student support and pastoral care, guidance counselling and the provision of professional development for teachers. It also involves accessing other supports such as educational psychology services. Additionally, schools engage in a wide range of sport and cultural activities which provide an important opportunity for students to experience success and personal growth. The whole staff shares responsibility for general student wellbeing.

The Wellbeing in Post Primary Schools Guidelines for Mental Health Promotion and Suicide Prevention (2013) and Wellbeing in Primary Schools Guidelines for Mental Health Promotion (2015) provide a Framework for schools to present in an integrated way the existing elements of good practice to promote positive mental health, and direct then to new practices as appropriate. They provide clear information for schools and for agencies supporting schools on how to address issues of mental health promotion. The European-wide, HSE supported, Health Promoting School Process (HSP) is also outlined, and the Wellbeing Guidelines show how the HSP can be introduced to schools to complement existing good practice. The Guidelines outline how schools support young people through early intervention and prevention, modelled on the NEPS Continuum of Support tiered approach.

**Key Messages in the Guidelines:**

- Mental health promotion is a shared responsibility of the whole school community;

- Mental health and Wellbeing are critical to success in school and in life;

- Schools play a vital role in providing a protective environment for young people which can counter risk factors;

- Having a whole school approach which fosters important links with the wider school community, and agencies which support schools, is key to successful implementation.
The content of the documents is not new. Existing elements of practice already expected of schools are integrated in the document as follows:

- Whole school focus on implementing the Social Personal and Health Education/Relationships and Sexuality Education curriculum;

- Formulation of the Whole-school Guidance Plan in post primary schools including implementation of the NEPS Continuum of Support;

- School Self-Evaluation process;

- HSE Health Promoting School Process;

- Critical Incident policy and plan;

- Student Support Teams.

**DES Support Services for Schools**

A range of services for professional development for teachers are provided by the DES which has a role in the promotion of Wellbeing and mental health. The services provide support at the level of whole school and classroom, support for some and support for a few. Continuing professional development is provided to primary and post-primary schools through the following services and supports:

- The National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS);

- Guidance Counselling service/provision;

- The National Behaviour Support Service (NBSS);

- The Special Education Support Service (SESS);

- Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST) Wellbeing Team;

- Junior Cycle for Teachers (JCT).

It is clear that the successful promotion of wellbeing entails its integration into whole-school planning and the collaboration of those, such as the guidance counsellor, who comprise the formal supports available to students in schools.

**NEPS** is a service of the Department of Education and Skills. NEPS psychologists work with both
primary and post-primary schools and they are concerned with learning, behaviour, social and emotional development. Each psychologist is assigned to a group of schools. NEPS psychologists specialise in working with the school community. They work in partnership with teachers, parents and children in identifying educational needs. They offer a range of services aimed at meeting these needs, for example, supporting individual students (through consultation and assessment), special projects and research.

**Career Guidance**

**School Education**

Career education is not mandatory. In junior cycle education (the first three years of post-primary education) the SPHE syllabus includes modules on influences and decisions, belonging and integrating and on self-management. It is recommended that these be delivered in collaboration with a school’s guidance plan. In senior cycle, two programmes – the LCVP and the LCA - which together account for around 24% of students, include career education modules.

Circular 0009/2018 under Appendix 3 Guidance Provision in Post Primary Schools, advises that the Whole School Guidance is a whole school activity where each school collaboratively develops a whole-school school guidance plan as a means of supporting the needs of students. It emphasises that all members of staff should fully recognise and ensure that guidance permeates every aspect of school life. Guidance plans should outline the school’s approach to guidance generally and how students can be supported and assisted in making choices and successful transitions in the personal and social, educational and career areas. The guidance plan should also distinguish between the competencies available within the school to support a student in situations where referral to the Health services or advising parents on the need to consider individual referral to a medical professional is warranted. Schools should consider how best to align resource allocation with the objectives of the Guidance Plan. The Board of Management should exercise oversight by reviewing and updating the Plan at regular intervals. Specifically, the Board should consider the plan and how it is resourced before it adopts the plan and makes it available to all staff, parents and students.

A number of documents have been suggested as proving useful to Boards in determining the optimum use of the improved teacher allocation.
Links