

## **SCHOOL MATTERS: The Report of the Task Force on Student Behaviour in Second Level Schools, 2006**

**Challenging student behaviour is increasing in Irish second level schools. Just over a year ago, a Task Force was established to investigate the issue and to report on its findings. This brief summary highlights examples of troublesome behaviours present in schools, some successful school practices and a number of wide ranging recommendations which, if implemented, should make a significant difference to the teaching and learning climate in schools.**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

In February 2005, the Minister for Education and Science, Mary Hanafin T.D., established a Task Force to examine the important issue of student behaviour in second level schools. The Task Force was given terms of reference which represented the working mandate which guided the deliberations of the Task Force for the period of time leading up to the presentation of the report to the Minister in January 2006. These terms of reference were:

- to examine the issue of disruptive student behaviour as it impacts upon teaching and learning;
- to consider the effectiveness of strategies at present employed to address it;
- to advise on existing best practice both nationally and internationally in fostering positive student behaviour in schools;
- to make recommendations on how best to promote an improved climate for teaching and learning in classrooms and schools.

### **THE COMPOSITION OF THE TASK FORCE**

The Task Force was comprised of 12 persons who brought to the table a variety of experience and expertise. These people included the coordinators of two national programmes, i.e. The School Completion Programme and Youthreach Programme; a former director of a Youth Encounter Project; a principal and a deputy principal; five classroom teachers; a solicitor who is chairperson of a Board of Management and a teacher educator with a background in psychology who chaired the Task Force. The group was very ably assisted by administrative support supplied by the Department of Education and Science and by secretarial support from a recording secretary.

### **SOURCES OF DATA**

The data which informed the final report came from a number of sources. There was a call in the national press for submissions in line with the terms of reference. This call yielded 153 submissions, all of which were read in great detail by members of the Task Force. The submissions proved very valuable and informed the thinking and subsequent thrust of the recommendations. The Task Force carried out visits to

schools and Education Centres where they engaged in discussion with representatives from across the school community. The learning that occurred during these visits is woven in to the fabric of the report. There was intense engagement with the Partners in Education and the partner delegations that visited the Task Force during their meetings represented their constituents robustly and fairly. Some briefings with specialist groups both in Ireland and in the U.K. were set up during the period when the Task Force sat. These specialist briefings were carried out with experts who either worked as researchers or who had sat on Task Forces in Scotland and in England and who had much to contribute. All of the work was underpinned by the research base which is linked to the complex theme of student behaviour. The accumulated data were considered carefully during the 19 plenary meetings of the Task Force.

## FINDINGS

It became clear to the Task Force that it is difficult to paint a national picture of the state of discipline in the nation's schools. It is as though there are as many discipline profiles as there are schools. There is also individual variation in how each situation is described and what constitutes serious problems for one school may not appear to be quite so serious for another school. A few things are, however, not in dispute.

- 1) It appears that it is a small number of students in every school who cause the most trouble. The impact that these few students can make must not be underestimated.
- 2) This small number of students seems to be on the increase.
- 3) There are some schools which seem to be less able to cope successfully with the challenges of disruptive behaviour than others.
- 4) The issue of student misbehaviour is complex and so complex solutions are required in any serious response to making things better.

The Task Force learned of the range of disruptive behaviours that schools today encounter. These are on a continuum from mildly disturbing behaviour to serious criminal behaviour that no school should have to tolerate. While the criminal behaviour tends to grab media attention, the cumulative impact of ongoing low level disruption must not be underestimated, as it, too, has a corrosive effect on teaching and learning. Below is a sample of the behaviours that were brought to the attention of the Task Force:

- coming late for class
- ongoing failure to bring relevant class materials
- constant challenging of teacher authority
- ignoring the presence of the teacher in the classroom
- blatant refusal to follow instructions or to comply with requests
- throwing paper aeroplanes/pens/objects
- walking aimlessly around the classroom
- using inappropriate language
- making noises/humming
- rummaging in bags
- taunting and pushing
- shouting each other down/slagging/offending remarks about a student's mother, siblings or family members
- eating, and chewing gum

- cyber bullying and using mobile telephones in ways and times that are inappropriate

At the more serious end of the spectrum the following examples were cited:

- threats to teachers and damage to their property
- fighting and physical assault of peers
- open defiance of an insolent and deeply offensive nature
- remarks to teachers of an overt sexual nature
- the use of foul or obscene language with no regard for boundaries
- the carrying of dangerous weapons into the school environment
- efforts to sell illegal substances in the school environment
- vandalism and theft of school property
- bullying of all kinds to include homophobic bullying, harassment and intimidation of others

### SCHOOLS THAT COPE

There are very few if any schools that are disruption free, but some schools more than others experience undue challenges to their efforts to create and to maintain an orderly teaching and learning environment. Schools that cope well in their efforts to protect a harmonious teaching and learning context have certain features. The diagram below summarises these features.



Successful schools are characterised by an ethos that is pastoral and where the culture is one of listening and communicating. There are good structures in place, and a range of policies is implemented fairly and consistently. There is quality leadership

throughout the school. Students are empowered and exercise a strong voice in relevant issues that pertain to the healthy status of the school. Parents are meaningfully involved in the school and are supportive of the school in carrying out its mission. The schools enjoy access to outside agencies with which they collaborate. There is flexibility in the placement of students with opportunities for students to be readmitted to a school following placement in another educational facility. Curricular provision is suited to the learning needs and competencies of the students. Teaching methodologies are varied and involve students in an active, participative way.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The Task Force made a set of recommendations that, if implemented, should help to turn around the situation which is currently a source of grave concern to educators and society alike concerning student disruption in second level schools. Each recommendation is presented in a way which outlines the responsibility of each stakeholder in fulfilment of the recommendation's implementation. This is an important aspect of the presentation of the set of recommendations, as the Task Force is strongly of the view that any solution to student behaviour is **a shared responsibility** and requires a response from a wide variety of sources to bring about an improved situation. The recommendations set out below mirror the longer version of the recommendations which can be accessed in the final report, *School Matters, 2006*. The Task Force recommends:

- that Schools and Parents ensure that at all times they work in ways that promote genuine collaboration in the best interest of the young people whose progress and well-being both aspire to achieve.
- that schools receive the range of supports that is necessary to ensure that meaningful inclusion and integration is implemented for the full spectrum of students.
- that all schools ensure that they have a transfer programme in place that is comprehensive and sensitive, so that new entrants into a school, and their parents, have a sense of belonging to a school community that is inclusive and caring, and that promotes collaboration among all the stakeholders so as to ensure a happy and enriching educational experience for the student.
- that teacher education becomes an integral part of all levels of the profession, i.e. pre-service, induction, and continuing professional development (CPD). It further recommends that a National Framework for the CPD of the teaching profession be put in place.
- that schools make a conscious effort to implement school policies in ways that are uniform and that are consonant with the characteristic spirit of the school.
- that there be increased collaboration between schools and those agencies that have specialist expertise in catering for the needs of children.

- that schools create opportunities to allow the voice of students to be heard in ways that contribute to the creation of constructive working relationships with the student body.
- that where a teacher is experiencing difficulty in the discharge of his/her professional role, that a series of steps should be invoked aimed at bringing the situation to a satisfactory resolution. Similarly, the Task Force recommends that where a Principal is experiencing difficulty in the discharge of his/her professional role, that the Board Management move to bring that situation to a satisfactory resolution.
- that Year Heads receive a time allocation consonant with the demands of their role, relative to school size, and that these hours be compensated for by the Department of Education and Science in line with the teacher-pupil ratio within that school.
- that the legal department of the Department of Education and Science revisit the legislation with a view to ensuring the rights of the compliant majority to learn
- that a new Circular be issued to schools which reflects accurately the current legislative framework, and makes clear the rights and the responsibilities of all parties.
- that a survey instrument be developed, that would be employed to carry out a national audit in our schools at two-year intervals, and thereby provide accurate baseline data on the state of discipline in our schools, both at primary and second level.
- that consideration should be given to the development of a Charter of Rights and Responsibilities for the school community so that all its members could feel more confident about the safeguarding of their own position.
- that at the soonest feasible date there be additional personnel recruited into NEPS so that this Body can assist schools in a more satisfactory way than is currently the position.
- that the curriculum reform which is well underway and which is taking hold in our schools be continued and that innovations related to curriculum innovations be evaluated and disseminated.
- that a Behaviour Support Team be established within an overall coherent, clearly articulated, national framework of support for schools.
- that schools in greatest need set up a Behaviour Support Classroom where the most persistent students be referred on a temporary basis

and where they receive relevant help to enable them to return to their regular classroom.

- that success experiences in dealing with disruption among students be documented by individual schools or individual practitioners, and that these accounts be posted on a nominated website/s, compiled as a data base in local Education Centres, shared through conference presentations, or in educational journals or newsletters.
- that the McGuinness report to improve the existing class size be implemented.
- that an overseeing committee be set up to ensure the faithful implementation of the report's recommendations.

## CONCLUSION

Readers are encouraged to read the full version of the report which is available on the website of the Department of Education and Science. The report is called *School Matters: The Report of the Task Force on Student Behaviour in Second Level Schools, 2006*. Follow the link to Task Force on Student Behaviour. Both the interim report of July 2005 and the final report are available for downloading at that location ([www.education.ie](http://www.education.ie)).