Handing over the Report to Anne O'Donnell, Department of Children and Youth Affairs, October 2016

Kilkenny Comhairle na nÓg takes imaginative wellbeing initiative

By Dr Gerry Jeffers, Educational researcher and lecturer, Education Department, Maynooth University

Many schools are proactive in addressing mental health issues. Young people in Kilkenny Comhairle na nÓg[1] recently devised an imaginative framework to support schools in this important work. They followed this up with a pilot project in selected schools. 'The evidence from participants in the pilot project points to the effectiveness of the framework in supporting schools to address wellbeing issues. In particular, the contributions of the students in the focus group interviews confirm the relevance and immediacy of the initiative,' concluded a recent evaluation.[2]

One of the teachers in a pilot school remarked:

'I suppose we were already doing quite a number of things suggested in the mental health project. The framework helped us focus on doing the right things. The students were centrally involved. It was very much a partnership. Indeed, often they were proactive, making good

suggestions, putting the pressure on us teachers to take action.'
One strategy involves Transition Year students mentoring first years. A TY student in one of the pilot schools remarked:

'We had training as mentors and we learned games you can play with first years and this was really good as there were some people who didn't know anyone because they came from a different primary school and they were kinda forced to talk to people they didn't know. It was good.'

A classmate added:

'Being a mentor brought me back to when I was a first year myself. I remember how scared I used be on the bus. It's easy to forget all that. So, you want to make the first years comfortable.'

According to another TY student:

'When you get training as a mentor it does make you think a lot more about people's feelings. You also

learn to look out for people on their own.'

FRAMEWORK

- The framework begins with the suggestion that each school appoints a mental health co-ordinator. This person should be supported by a committee that represents the whole school community, and committee members should engage in relevant training. Continuous raising of awareness of mental health within the school is seen as vitally important. The framework poses some very relevant questions, for example:

- Do pupils have clear, private and accessible sources of information regarding supports for mental health issues relating to bullying, sexual orientation, separation, family or other issues?

- Do pupils have and know they have access to a non-teaching adult to talk about an issue whilst protecting their anonymity from their peers?

Does the school have a buddy system in place for First Years?

Does the school host events that encourage quieter / shy / marginalised pupils to positively participate in the school community, be more aware of issues, etc?

Has the school delivered mental health tuition as set out in SPHE?

Has each year group been able to avail of a retreat outside of the school premises?

Has the school provided additional supports for students to help them cope with exam pressure?

Has the school delivered workshops to Transition Year students relating to mental health, using outside agencies such as GROW, Kilkenny Lifeline, Foroige, The Samaritans, AWARE, Ossory Youth, etc?

Has the school a clear anti-bullying policy and evidence to show that the policy is being thoroughly implemented?

Has the school raised awareness on behalf, and in support, of the LGBT student population and the issues affecting them in coming / not coming out?

Can the school evidence a wide and varied curriculum of non-academic activities that encourages niche participation and diversity of pupils?

Has the school organised mental health workshops for parents?

Has the school a dedicated 'quiet' 'chillax' room for pupils to sit, read, listen to music and recreate?

● Does the school diary display information on accessible, free and confidential services for young people with mental health issues?

WIDER CONTEXT

A key 2012 Irish study[3] noted that: 'The number one health issue for young people is their mental health.' According that that report, 'Good mental health in adolescence is a requirement for optimal psychological development, the development and maintenance of productive social relationships, effective learning, an ability to care for oneself, good physical health, and effective economic participation as adults[4]'.

The *My World Survey* concluded that between the ages of 12 and 25, young people are particularly vulnerable. While a majority were found to be functioning well across a variety of mental health indicators, the researchers noted that mental health difficulties emerged in early adolescence and peaked in the late teens and early 20s. They state:

'This peak in mental health difficulties, in general, was coupled with a decrease in protective factors such as self-esteem, optimism and positive coping strategies.'

Dooley and Fitzgerald identified five themes related to key mental health indicators. They are:
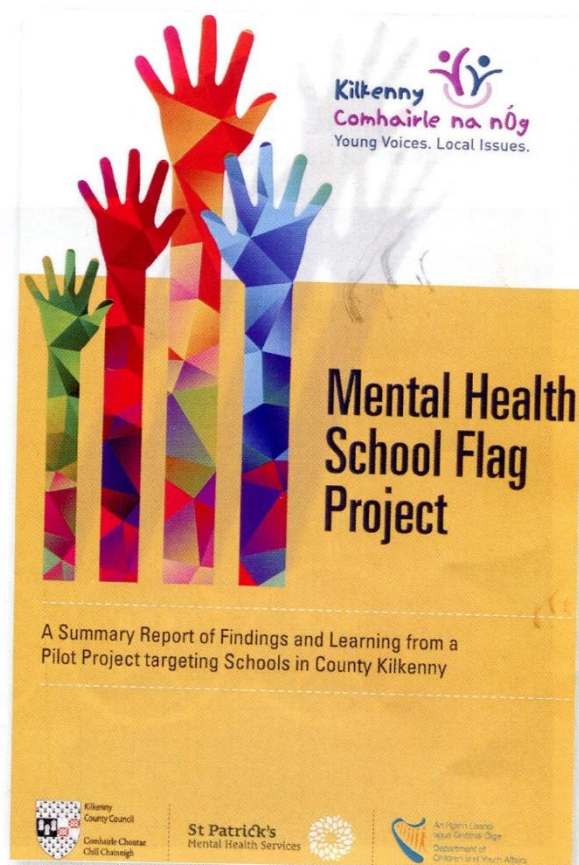
● 'One Good Adult' is important in the mental well-being of young people.

● Excessive drinking has very negative

consequences for the mental health and adjustment of young people.

● Young adults' experiences of financial stress are strongly related to their mental health and well-being.

● Rates of suicidal thoughts, self-harm and suicide attempts were found to be higher in young adults who did not seek help or talk about their problems.

● Talking about problems is associated with lower mental health distress and higher positive adjustment.

VARIED VIEWS

The urgency of the project for Kilkenny Comhairle na nÓg members was driven partly by concern about their own school experiences. One young man recalled:

Kilkenny Comhairle na nÓg
Young Voices. Local Issues.

Mental Health School Flag Project

A Summary Report of Findings and Learning from a Pilot Project targeting Schools in County Kilkenny

Kilkenny County Council
Comhairle Chontae Chill Chainnigh

St Patrick's Mental Health Services

An Roinn Leanaí agus Gnóthaí Óige
Department of Children and Youth Affairs

'We had SPHE in school but my memory is of teachers going through stuff because they had to, often just reading from the book. Ten minutes on depression is not enough and nobody wants to be the guy in SPHE who admits to having problems. I'd like to see more initiatives that get people talking, even among friends.'

The Kilkenny Comhairle members were impressed with how the Green Schools Flag project had succeeded in raising environmental awareness. They proposed a mental health flag for schools that implemented the framework. A former member of the Comhairle says:

'One of the things I really like about the Comhairle na nÓg project is that it offers activities that can work with all years throughout the school. I like the idea of getting a flag to make a public statement that the school has taken mental health issues seriously.'

Her views are echoed by Gordon Lynch, a psychotherapist who advised the group. Gordon is also aware how school principals, teachers and parents might have reservations about the idea. He says:

'Many have conflicted attitudes and mixed emotions, sometimes because of how people they know have been affected. I am aware from elsewhere in the country of how tragedies and critical incidents can be overwhelming for schools. As I see it, a flag is a way of making a statement that, as a community, we encourage the idea of positive mental health. The fact that, despite everyone's best efforts, incidents occur, doesn't negate the value of making the statement.'

Paul Fields, Director of the Kilkenny Education Centre is well positioned to observe the pressures on schools. He says:

'It is as if they are swamped by mental health initiatives. There are a lot of very well intentioned individuals offering all sorts of things to schools but the quality is uneven. It's like a big load of apples were tipped into the school grounds. You have to take a bite to see which ones taste good.'

Students and teachers in the schools that took part in the pilot project were enthusiastic about the framework while those in other schools had more mixed views. According to one of the participating teachers:

'We have noticed a change in the school environment as a result of the initiatives we have taken. Senior students come to us teachers more often and say they are concerned about this or that fellow student. It's driven by concern and is a very positive development.'

She adds that that the flag project has made the staff more aware of the signs of a mentally healthy school. Angela Campion, who was employed as project manager during the pilot stage, remarks:

'One of the things that impresses me about the project is the peer support dimension. Whether the issues are to do with bullying, exam stress, loss or death, or LGBT, peer support can make a big difference. The need is to have school as a safe environment for everyone, especially the more
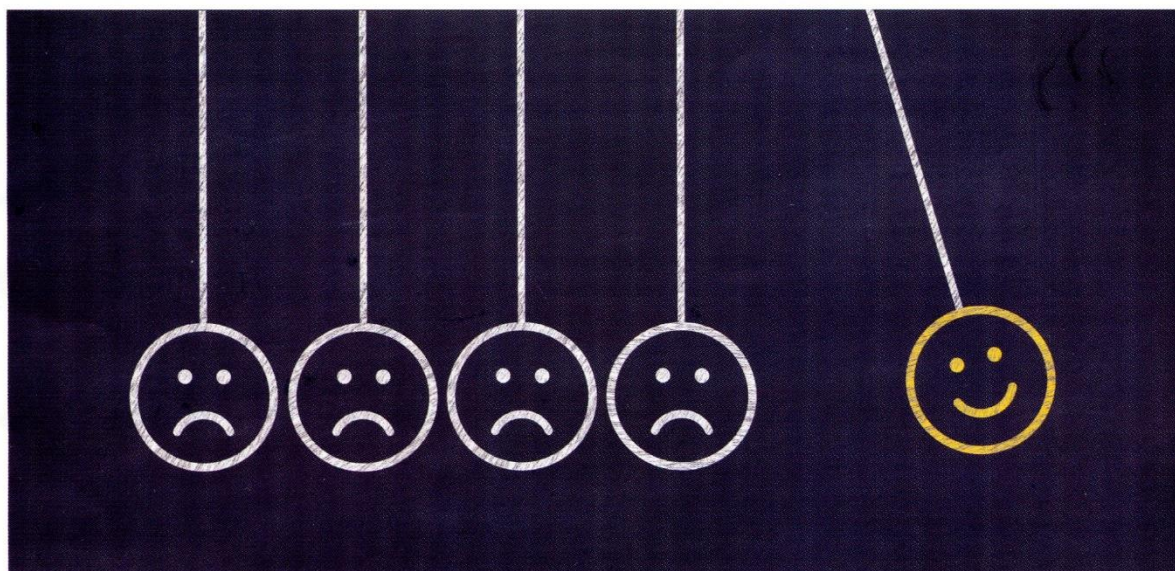
vulnerable young people. The goal is schools where all are accepted, where bullying in not acceptable, particularly if you are non-white, gay or from a Traveller background'.

CHALLENGES

The schools that took part in the pilot project have few illusions about how difficult it can be for schools to get mental health initiatives right. Limited time, and the need for adequate planning, present big challenges. While most agree that engaging with agencies outside the school is important, one of the guidance counsellors noted that 'sometimes people outside the school system have very good ideas but they don't always "get" how schools actually work.'

Schools were keen to point out that they are already engaged in a range of activities that can be grouped under a 'wellbeing' or 'mental health' umbrella, particularly through curricular activities and pastoral structures. While the framework adds further impetus and focus, the schools were quite nuanced in how they regard the issues. While many welcomed 'outside' speakers, some also expressed a wariness about 'well-intentioned' individuals and organisations. Such reservations are rooted in poor previous experiences of invited guest speakers.

Interviews with school principals underline how traumatic critical incidents such as a suicide can be for the whole school community. Some contend that the sensitive nature of the topic of 'mental health' demands greater care about language usage; 'wellbeing' is sometimes suggested as a more appropriate term. Such sensitivity also leads to discomfort among students: some about awarding a 'flag' for addressing a core part of a school's mission; the negative connotations of 'flag-waving' were mentioned. However, reservations

about a flag are often accompanied by very positive opinions about the framework. Strong support for a wellbeing award, perhaps with more focus on intentionality and processes than on achievements, emerges from the evaluation. The project provides strong support for the viewpoint that states:

'Schools play a vital role in the promotion of positive mental health in young people. Schools can provide a safe and supportive environment for building life skills and resilience and a strong sense of connectedness to school. The fostering of healthy relationships with peers, teachers and school staff is essential to a young person's positive experience of school and their cognitive and emotional development. The needs and well-being of school staff also need to be considered and supported. Education about mental health and well-being is an integral part of the school curriculum. It is especially important to address the myths and stigma surrounding mental health and suicide, which for many young people are barriers to seeking support[5].'

CONCLUSION

The Kilkenny Comhairle na nÓg project challenges schools to look at their current policies and practices regarding well-being and mental health, to recognise the continually changing environments in which young people live and to be imaginative and innovative in their curricular, pastoral and extra-curricular responses. Rather than rely on *ad hoc* arrangements, this project makes the case for well-structured, systemic, whole-school interventions. Following this initiative, opportunities now exist, for government departments in particular, to advance an award-related framework for positive mental health in schools at regional and national levels. Following an official launch in

October 2016 by Dr Niall Muldoon, Ombudsman for Children, both report and evaluation were formally handed over to the Department of Children and Youth Affairs.

According to Paul Gilligan, CEO of St Patrick's Mental Health Services, which commissioned the evaluation, 'This report highlights the need for a national approach for mental health education, and offers a framework of how to achieve this.' And Councillor Malcolm Noonan, Chairperson of the Kilkenny Comhairle na nÓg Steering Committee, adds that the project '... challenges all of us who hold positions of responsibility for the wellbeing of young people to work tirelessly towards a common aim of putting in place stuff that works and is proven to work.'

Dr Gerry Jeffers is an educational researcher and lecturer who wrote 'Kilkenny Comhairle na nÓg Mental Health School Flag project – an evaluation.' He is also the author of Transition Year in Action, *Liffey Press, 2015.*

Footnotes

1   Comhairlí na nÓg are child and youth councils in the 34 local authorities of the country, which give children and young people the opportunity to be involved in the development of local services and policies.

2   The full evaluation is available at kilkenny-comhairle-mh-full-report-sept-2016 For a summary report go to summary-report-mhsf-project-kilkenny

3   Dooley, B and Fitzgerald, A (2012) My World Survey: National Study of Youth Mental Health in Ireland , Dublin: Headstrong and UCD School of Psychology, p.vii

4   (ibid, p. vii).

5   DES, HSE, DoH, Ireland (2013) Well-being in Post-Primary Schools, Guidelines for Mental Health

6   Promotion and Suicide Prevention, Dublin: Department of Education and Skills/Health Service Executive/ Department of Health.