

May 2026

Updated Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice

Submission to the Department of Education and Youth



ombudsman
do leanaí
for children

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1. Introduction

The Ombudsman for Children's Office (OCO) welcomes the opportunity to submit to the consultation on the updated Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice (Wellbeing Policy).

The OCO is an independent statutory body which was established in 2004 under the Ombudsman for Children Act 2002 (2002 Act). Under the 2002 Act, as amended, the OCO has two core statutory functions:

- to promote the rights and welfare of children up to 18 years of age, and
- to examine and investigate complaints made by or on behalf of children about the administrative actions of public bodies, schools and voluntary hospitals that have, or may have, adversely affected a child.

In [A Piece of My Mind](#), a children's mental health survey published by the OCO in 2023, 74% of children viewed school and exam pressures as the top source of stress, depression and anxiety. Most children identified the availability of mental health services in schools as a priority for them, with 62% asking for psychologists, counsellors and therapists to be made available in their schools.¹ Children who responded to the survey were more likely to rely on teachers or school counsellors (41%) for their information on mental health, than parents or families (39%).²

The topic of wellbeing and mental health supports in schools has long been a focus of the OCO and we welcome recent developments by the Department of Education and Youth (the Department) that seek to enhance the role of schools in providing wellbeing and mental health supports, including:

- the expansion of the 2023 pilot scheme of counselling and wellbeing supports in primary schools, including the introduction of Education Wellbeing Teams³
- the continuation of wellbeing grants to schools in the 2025/2026 school year⁴
- the development of the new SPHE Curriculum with an increased focus on promoting emotional wellbeing, inclusion and critical life skills⁵
- the new [Traveller and Roma Education Strategy](#).

The OCO is of the view that existing mental health and wellbeing supports should be expanded to ensure equal access to children in all schools. We are also of the view that schools need to be properly resourced to be able to provide appropriate wellbeing supports to students and that proper training and guidance needs to be provided to all school staff to enable them to plan and provide for a supportive environment for their students. The purpose of this submission is to outline a number

¹ Ombudsman for Children's Office (2023), [A Piece of My Mind](#), pp. 7-10.

² Ibid., p. 12.

³ Department of Education and Youth (2025), [Education Wellbeing Teams Counselling and Mental Health Pilot in Primary Schools: Strand 2 Information for Schools 2025-2026](#).

⁴ Department of Education and Youth (1 December 2025), [Therapy and Inclusion Services](#); Department of Education and Youth (22 October 2024), [Minister Foley extends in-school counselling pilot to 61 urban DEIS primary schools](#), and Houses of the Oireachtas, Dáil Éireann Debate (10 Feb 2026), [Departmental Schemes](#).

⁵ NCCA (2025), [Wellbeing Specification for Primary and Special Schools](#); NCCA (2023), [Social, Personal & Health Education \(SPHE\) Specification for Junior Cycle](#).

of key areas where we believe that consideration should be given to in order to strengthen the provision of wellbeing practices in schools.

2. Consultation with children and young people

In early 2026, we ran a series of discussions with our Youth Advisory Panel (YAP) to seek their views on what the Department of Education and Youth's Convention on Education should consider. These discussions were framed around the specific provisions of Articles 28 and 29 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), as well as General Comment no. 1 on the aims of education. YAP members identified several key areas where they would like to see improvements made in the Irish school system over the coming years. Many of their views are relevant to wellbeing in schools, so are included here for consideration by the Department as they develop the updated Wellbeing Policy.

Greater efforts to make schools inclusive spaces for all young people

Our YAP members felt that some schools still do not take a strong enough stance against bullying and the use of discriminatory language among students. They believed that bullying regularly “flies under the radar” and too often the use of homophobic and racial slurs is ignored, downplayed or dismissed as “a joke”. It was suggested that one-off awareness raising events are insufficient in and of themselves. There was a clear preference for these to be accompanied by more robust efforts by all school staff to address discriminatory attitudes, language and behaviour.

YAP members also reported a lack of school-wide initiatives to promote equality and respect for different cultures, explaining that such subjects tend to be only superficially discussed, usually in the context of one-off lessons as part of subjects like CSPE.

Prioritising student wellbeing and mental health

Several YAP members felt that a greater focus needed to be placed on promoting positive mental health within schools. As well as highlighting how school environments themselves can be incredibly overstimulating for some students, they pointed to intense workloads and pressure around exams as major contributing factors towards students feeling overwhelmed and exhausted. They further acknowledged how this can impact negatively on students' capacity to pursue hobbies and interests outside school hours.

The YAP also stressed that teachers should be better equipped to support student wellbeing. Emphasising the importance of teachers' being empathetic, they suggested that some teachers could develop a better understanding of how a student's personal circumstances may be impacting on their engagement in class.

Guaranteeing that all students receive the supports they need

A key issue identified by YAP members was the need to tackle waiting lists for assessments of needs. Some members described their frustration at not being able to access necessary school supports due to the severe delays in receiving a diagnosis. Again, it was highlighted how this can cause particular anxiety for students preparing to sit state examinations due to the uncertainty over whether they will be deemed eligible to receive reasonable accommodations.

A further recommendation was that there be greater provision to support students with English as an additional language.

Giving students a meaningful say in how schools are run

What clearly emerged from consulting with our YAP was that the extent to which students feel they have a genuine input into decision-making within their schools varies hugely. While some felt that they have opportunities to shape school policies, others mentioned that students are rarely consulted in decision-making processes and that the role of student councils can be unclear. They make the point that if some schools can do it, then all schools can do it.

3. Education: a children's rights issue

Having ratified the UNCRC in 1992, Ireland is obliged under international law to respect, protect and fulfil the rights of all children living in Ireland. In its [General Comment Number 1 on the Article 29\(1\): The Aims of Education](#), the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (the Committee) notes that children do not lose their human rights by virtue of passing through the school gates and that education must be provided in a way that respects the inherent dignity of the child.⁶

The Committee has highlighted that education should be child-centred, child-friendly and empowering, and for the need for educational processes to be based upon the very principles it enunciates.⁷ It also states that “the education to which every child has a right is one designed to provide the child with life skills, to strengthen the child’s capacity to enjoy the full range of human rights and to promote a culture which is infused by appropriate human rights values”.⁸

However, we note that the Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice 2018–2023 does not refer to relevant children’s rights standards and does not require consideration of children’s rights when planning for or promoting wellbeing in schools.

Children’s rights

The UNCRC contains four general principles, which are integral to the realisation of all children’s rights under the UNCRC:

- Article 2 provides that all children must be able to enjoy their rights without discrimination of any kind, irrespective of their circumstances or those of their parents/guardians.

Discrimination has been defined as “the unequal treatment of different categories of people when this treatment cannot be justified on the basis of objective and reasonable criteria”.⁹ Rather than requiring all children to be treated the same, the principle of equality sometimes requires States Parties “to take affirmative action in order to diminish or eliminate conditions which cause or help to perpetuate discrimination”.¹⁰ The Council of Europe Strategy for the Rights of the Child attributes special attention to the needs of discriminated and marginalised groups of children, including

⁶ United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, [General Comment no.1 \(2001\), Article 29 \(1\): The Aims of Education](#), CRC/GC/2001/1, para 8.

⁷ Ibid., Para 2.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Council of Europe (2026), [Children in vulnerable situations](#).

¹⁰ UN Human Rights Committee, [General Comment No. 18, \(1989\): Non-discrimination](#), HRI/GEN/1/Rev.8, paras. 7 to 13, pp. 187 – 188.

children with disabilities, LGBTIQ+ children and Roma children.¹¹ The OCO is therefore of the view that the updated Wellbeing Policy should include reference to specific vulnerable cohorts of children.

- Article 3 requires children's best interests be treated as a primary consideration in all actions concerning them.
- Article 6 recognises children's right to life, survival and development. In this regard, States are expected to interpret 'development' as a holistic concept encompassing all aspects of children's development and are obliged to provide optimal conditions for childhood.¹²
- Article 12 provides for children's right to express their views freely in all matters affecting them and for due weight to be given to children's views, in accordance with their age and maturity.

In this regard, and if not already doing so, the Department should consult with children and young people to seek their views and experiences of how the current Wellbeing Policy is being implemented across schools. Their views should also be sought on what the updated Wellbeing Policy should, or should not, include.

At school level, the updated Wellbeing Policy should require ongoing engagement with students to seek their views on how wellbeing is being promoted and supported by their school. Consideration should be given to how such feedback could be sought from more vulnerable students who may be less likely to engage.

The Committee has also highlighted that the education system must promote and reinforce the enjoyment of children's other rights. This includes not only the content of the curriculum, but also the educational processes, the pedagogical methods and the environment within which education takes place.¹³ These rights include children's rights to:

- freedom of expression (Article 13)
- freedom of thought, conscience and religion (Article 14)
- freedom of association and freedom of peaceful assembly (Article 15)
- privacy (Article 16)
- the rights of children with disabilities (Article 23)
- the highest attainable standard of health, including mental health (Article 24)
- enjoy their own culture, religion or language (Article 30).

We are of the view that the updated Wellbeing Policy should refer to and acknowledge the children's rights that are engaged in relation to the topic of wellbeing in order to ensure that they are fully considered by schools and school staff.

¹¹ Council of Europe (2026), [Children in vulnerable situations](#).

¹² UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, [General Comment No. 5 \(2003\), General measures of implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, \(arts. 4, 42 and 44, para. 6\)](#), CRC/GC/2003/5, para. 12.

¹³ United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, [General Comment no.1 \(2001\), Article 29 \(1\): The Aims of Education](#), CRC/GC/2001/1, para 8.

Recommendations:

The updated Wellbeing Policy should:

- *raise awareness of wellbeing as a children's rights issue*
- *support an understanding of how children's enjoyment of their rights can be enhanced by inclusive and supportive wellbeing practices*
- *promote a child rights-based approach to wellbeing that, among other things, upholds the child's right to non-discrimination, treats the child's best interests as a primary consideration, and fulfils the child's right to be heard.*

A holistic approach to education

Education must extend beyond academic achievement to encompass the complete development of the child.¹⁴ The Committee has outlined the need for a holistic approach to education which ensures that the educational opportunities made available reflect an appropriate balance between promoting the physical, mental, spiritual and emotional aspects of education, the intellectual, social and practical dimensions, and the childhood and lifelong aspects.¹⁵

The key goal of education has been identified as the development of the individual child's personality, talents and abilities, in recognition of the fact that every child has unique characteristics, interests, abilities, and learning needs.¹⁶ The Committee has emphasised that the type of teaching that is focused primarily on accumulation of knowledge, prompting competition and leading to an excessive burden of work on children, may seriously hamper the development of the child to the fullest potential of their abilities and talents.¹⁷

As stated previously, 74% of children who responded to an OCO survey viewed school and exam pressures as the top source of stress, depression and anxiety.¹⁸ In its 2023 Concluding Observations on Ireland, the Committee recommended reform of the Leaving Certificate Examination with a view to reducing the stress caused to children.¹⁹ While the OCO welcomes the Department's work in this area, we are of the view that successfully embedding wellbeing policies and initiatives in schools

¹⁴ UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, [General Comment No. 5 \(2003\), General measures of implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, \(arts. 4, 42 and 44, para. 6\)](#), CRC/GC/2003/5, para. 12.

¹⁵ United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, [General Comment no.1 \(2001\), Article 29 \(1\): The Aims of Education](#), CRC/GC/2001/1, para.12.

¹⁶ Ibid., para. 9.

¹⁷ Ibid., para. 12.

¹⁸ Ombudsman for Children's Office (2023), [A Piece of My Mind](#), pp. 7-10.

¹⁹ UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, [\(2023\) Concluding Observations on the combined 5th and 6th periodic reports of Ireland](#), CRC/C/IRL/CO/5-6, para. 27.

requires a fundamental reorientation in the approach to education in the Irish system, with a shift to a focus on the individual, rather than solely the academic.

Recommendation:

The updated Wellbeing Policy should specifically outline how it intends to equip students with the practical tools they need to comprehend and manage their physical health, mental health, and overall wellbeing, in order to navigate anxiety and stress that may occur both in their academic life and in their personal life.

4. Wellbeing supports for Vulnerable Children

As mentioned above, the OCO welcomes developments undertaken by the Department to promote additional supports in schools, some of which are targeted at specific cohorts of children. However, from the OCO's engagement with children of a variety of different backgrounds over the years, we are aware of a lack of awareness and understanding, amongst students and educators alike, of children of different or disadvantaged backgrounds, with the need for training and education on their circumstances, experiences and the particular challenges they may face. In this regard, we also see the potential for what schools can do to support the wellbeing of these children if proper guidance, training and resources are provided.

The current Wellbeing Policy makes a number of references to vulnerable children, but apart from referring briefly to children with special educational needs (SEN) and children attending DEIS schools, does not specify who these vulnerable children may be or what specific wellbeing supports may be needed for these different cohorts of children.

Children with disabilities

The State has obligations under the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) to provide for an inclusive education system.²⁰ The updated Wellbeing Policy should consider how schools can become a better supportive hub for children with SEN to fully realise the aspiration of an inclusive education system. Other than access to adequate short term psychological assessments along with in-school therapeutic assessments which may fall outside the remit of the Wellbeing Policy, this should include access to adequately trained teachers, SNAs, and special supports to facilitate the wellbeing needs of all children with SEN.

Disadvantaged Children:

In its 2023 Concluding Observations, the Committee outlined its concerns at the 'persistent barriers faced by children in disadvantaged situations to accessing quality education'.²¹ The OCO has welcomed the number of positive recent developments, including the Hot School Meals Programme and the Free School Books scheme, that help to better provide for disadvantaged children to ensure their equal access to

²⁰ Ombudsman for Children's Office (2022), [Plan for Places](#), p. 6.

²¹ UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, (2023) [Concluding Observations on the combined 5th and 6th periodic reports of Ireland](#), CRC/C/IRL/CO/5-6, para. 36 (a).

education. While we welcome that the current Wellbeing Policy does refer to students experiencing disadvantage, the corresponding actions are limited to DEIS schools.

In this regard, we are concerned that disadvantaged children in non-DEIS schools are not offered similar levels of support to those who attend DEIS schools. We are therefore of the view that the updated Wellbeing Policy should also provide for wellbeing supports for students experiencing disadvantage in non-DEIS schools.

LGBTIQ+ children

While we welcome the SPHE curriculum which promotes inclusivity, schools remain a place where LGBTIQ+ students do not always feel safe, with high rates of reports of harassment and exclusion.²²

Over two-thirds of LGBTIQ+ students have reported hearing homophobic remarks from other students, with half reporting that that staff did not intervene if present when homophobic remarks were made.²³ This issue has been echoed by members of our YAP.²⁴ BelongTo's survey of primary school staff revealed an overwhelming willingness among primary staff to be LGBTIQ+ inclusive, but revealed a lack of knowledge, skills and confidence to deliver fully inclusive practice for their pupils.²⁵ In this regard, the updated Wellbeing Policy should provide for specific wellbeing supports for LGBTIQ+ students. This should be supported by comprehensive LGBTIQ+ inclusivity policies and training for teaching staff.

Traveller/Roma children:

Traveller and Roma children have outlined their and their experiences of racism, discrimination, exclusion and bullying in schools, by children and by teachers.²⁶ We welcome developments to better include Traveller and Roma children in the Irish education system, such as through the [2024-2030 Traveller and Roma Education Strategy](#) along with plans to strengthen inclusion and cultural awareness, through professional teacher training and targeted cultural awareness training.²⁷

We note that the [Traveller and Roma Education Strategy: Plan for implementation and action 2024–2026](#) contains actions to support Traveller and Roma children and young people's wellbeing, including by including actions relevant to Traveller and Roma children and young people Wellbeing implementation plan.²⁸ We are of the view that the updated Wellbeing Policy should also provide for these specific wellbeing supports for Traveller and Roma children in order to embed the provision of these supports across all schools.

Children in the international protection system

Similarly, children with backgrounds in the international protection system or direct provision face obstacles to full participation in school life, and extracurricular activities, due to social factors, financial means and transport difficulties in some centres.²⁹ The OCO is of the view that the updated Wellbeing

²² In BelongTo's 2022 School Climate Survey, 76% of LGBTQ+ students felt unsafe in school, with 86% feeling isolated by other students - BelongTo (2022), [Irish School Climate Survey: Key Findings](#), p. 8.

²³ Ibid., p. 7.

²⁴ Ombudsman for Children's Office Youth Advisory Panel (2025), [Voices of Tomorrow](#), pp. 9-10.

²⁵ BelongTo (2024), [Belong To Primary 2024](#).

²⁶ Ombudsman for Children's Office (2022), [Pieces of Us](#), pp. 96-97, p. 146, pp. 149- 152.

²⁷ Government of Ireland (2023), [Traveller and Roma Education Strategy 2024- 2030](#), p. 29.

²⁸ Government of Ireland (2023), [Traveller and Roma Education Strategy - Plan for implementation and action 2024–2026](#), p. 26.

²⁹ Working Group to Report to Government on Improvements to the Protection Process, including Direct Provision and Supports to Asylum Seekers, (2015) [Final Report](#), para.5.60 and Ombudsman for Children's Office, (2020), [Direct Division](#), p. 26.

Policy should contain specific reference to the wellbeing needs of this particular cohort of children. This could include a requirement to promote intercultural awareness and cultivate a better understanding of their vulnerabilities and wellbeing needs.

Children in Care

Data shows that teachers often have lower expectations for care-experienced children than others, sometimes leading to insufficient or inconsistent support for these children.³⁰ Data also shows a lack of awareness among teachers of the real experiences of these children, with some teachers not being aware of the difficulties they face.³¹ In this regard, the updated Wellbeing Policy should include targeted supports to appropriately address the particular needs of care-experienced children.

Recommendations:

The updated Wellbeing Policy should refer to vulnerable cohorts of children such as those identified above, along with the need for specific wellbeing actions tailored to these individual groups.

The Department should:

- *consult with vulnerable cohorts of children to help identify the wellbeing supports they need or would benefit from in school.*
- *consider how to promote better awareness and understanding amongst school staff, teachers, guidance counsellors and Board of Management members of the circumstances and wellbeing needs of vulnerable cohorts of children.*
- *also consider the need to increase training and other resources to assist schools to best meet wellbeing needs.*

Consideration should be given to providing schools with a designated wellbeing officer in addition to the role of guidance counsellor in order to have someone professionally trained and equipped to deal with and provide support for the varying and complex wellbeing needs of all students.

³⁰ ESRI (2025), [*Care to College : An Exploratory Study on Care-Experienced Students' Educational Journeys.*](#)

³¹ *Ibid.*, and EPIC (2025), [*Take Care: The school experiences of children and young people who have been in care.*](#)

5. Digital Wellbeing

In the previous Wellbeing Policy Statement, opportunities to develop the necessary skills to cope with using online technology in a safe and appropriate way was identified as a factor relating to wellbeing promotion.³² The OCO welcomes the Department's online safety initiatives in providing training and tools to schools to promote digital citizenship. However, we still recognise a discernible gap in learning and the promotion of wellbeing around the digital environment. The school curriculum still does little to prepare children for the challenges they may face online, which is shown to have a direct correlation to children's increased risk of exposure to harm and inappropriate content,³³ to the detriment of their mental health and wellbeing.

Given that the digital environment has become a pivotal space in young people's lives, the OCO is of the view that the updated Wellbeing Policy should explicitly address digital wellbeing and the need to provide children with the practical tools for navigating challenges and managing their wellbeing online, just as is needed for in-person settings. This requires providing young people with the essential digital literacy and critical thinking skills to interpret, evaluate, and navigate information they may consume online. Developing a National Digital Literacy Campaign to promote wellbeing online at each level of the school curriculum would equip students with the skills to confidently navigate the online world safely, to understand and evaluate the media they may consume, build healthy digital habits by managing screentime and online boundaries, and to prepare them to effectively handle and overcome any challenges they may encounter in the online world. However, in the absence of such a campaign, the OCO is of the view that the updated Wellbeing Policy should include a focus on digital wellbeing.

Recommendations:

The new Wellbeing Policy for Education should explicitly recognise the online world as a fundamental space for children and young people today, which requires its own dedicated provisions for promoting digital wellbeing and skills.

Consideration should also be given to providing the necessary financial and digital infrastructure for schools, and to developing a National Digital Literacy Campaign to promote wellbeing online at each level of the school curriculum.

³² [Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice 2018-2023](#), p. 12.

³³ Cybersafe Kids (2024), [Left To Their Own Devices: The virtually unprotected lives of kids in Ireland](#), p. 8.

6. School governance

Complaints made to the OCO highlight how some decisions made at school management level can impact the wellbeing of their students and the OCO is of the view that school principals and Boards of Management should be required to consider the wellbeing of students when making such decisions. Two examples include requirements to pay school costs and school complaints procedures.

School costs:

The OCO has concerns regarding additional costs faced by some families, such as in relation to digital devices and Transition Year costs, along with the impact that this may have on children of families who cannot afford these items. We are also aware that many schools continue to request charges and voluntary contributions from parents each year.³⁴ While the OCO is aware that it is the position of the Department that schools must be clear that voluntary contributions are voluntary,³⁵ the OCO is aware of schools who have denied access to services and facilities, such as locker hire or school journals, to children whose parents have been unwilling, or unable, to pay these charges. This has served to identify and stigmatise these children to their peers in school. Schools should be required to consider the impact of requesting different payments or fees off families and be required to ensure that any actions that they take to deny access to services or facilities as a result of non-payment of such fees or contributions does not have a negative impact on the wellbeing of their students.

Complaints procedures:

Through the examination of complaints and concerns raised by children and their parents to our Office, we have observed a consistent pattern of systemic shortcomings in the way school-related complaints are managed. In our submission to the Conversation on Education,³⁶ we highlighted our concerns regarding the lack of an effective remedy for children and families, which can include concerns like:

- bullying, which could lead to unresolved concerns about the safety and welfare of pupils
- poor complaint-handling and
- processes becoming overly legalistic or focused on blame and failure of duty, rather than being transparent or child-centred.

Through our engagement with schools, the following issues continue to arise:

- a lack of clarity on decision-making processes and limited, or no, reasons for outcomes provided to parents
- a lack of engagement with the complainant on the categorisation of concerns, remit issues, and reflective practise
- school complaint procedures are not child-centred
- school complaints procedures deflect towards individual staff members and not towards a review of school policy, culture, or practise.

³⁴ FSSU, [School Charges and Voluntary Contributions](#) .

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ombudsman for Children's Office (2026), [OCO Submission to the Conversation on Education](#), pp 25 - 31.

The OCO is of the view that in its present form, the complaints framework within schools is not child friendly. We are particularly concerned that revised parental complaints procedures for primary schools³⁷ specifically refers to complaints about teachers only, not administrative or governance concerns and that similarly at secondary level, complaints procedures are focused on professional conduct, which means that unless a parent makes a complaint about a staff member, their complaint will not be processed. However, many of the complaints our Office receives are not about professional conduct of a teacher, but rather about how a school administered policies or procedures impacting on children and their welfare. This can include how a school has administered their bullying policy or addressed child protection concerns.

We are of the view that the updated Wellbeing Policy should require schools to consider how their complaints framework may impact on the wellbeing of students and that such policies should be amended to ensure that student wellbeing is not negatively impacted when a complaint or concern being dealt with.

Recommendation:

The updated Wellbeing Policy should include a requirement for school staff, principals and Boards of Management to consider the impact of school governance decisions on the wellbeing of students, with a particular focus on the impacts of such decisions on vulnerable or disadvantaged cohorts of children.

³⁷ School Patron Bodies (2023), [Revised Parental Complaints Procedure](#).