Tackling Bullying in Schools

A submission on behalf of the

National Association of Boards of Management in Special Education

June 2012
National Association of Boards of Management in Special Education (NABMSE)

NABMSE is the recognised partner for special education needs and one of the statutory consultative groups in the education sector. The core purpose of NABMSE is to unite Boards of Management in Special Education in the Republic by providing a means for the expression of their individual and collective experience on matters affecting the education of children with special needs. Our core objectives are:

- To promote the highest standard of education for persons with special needs.
- To achieve adequate deployment of resources to support education for persons with special needs.
- To encourage and facilitate communication and co-operation between persons engaged in the education of persons with special needs.
- To arrange or assist in arranging and providing conferences, discussions and meetings on subjects of general or special interest in the field of management in special education.
- To promote the study of best practices with regard to their impact on enhancing the abilities of persons with special needs.

NABMSE has 130 school members (special and mainstream schools) across the Republic catering for children across the full spectrum of special needs.
Introduction

On 17th May 2012, NABMSE was invited to participate in the Anti Bullying Forum in the Clock Tower in the Department of Education and Skills. This Forum brought together a range of experts, support groups and representatives of the schools sector including parents and students. After participating in that session, NABMSE decided to consult members by questionnaire (Appendix A). NABMSE would normally hold a consultative meeting to get members views but due to the proximity to the end of the school year, this was not feasible.

Questionnaires were distributed by email to NABMSE members (special and mainstream schools) and schools were asked to reply within a short time frame. While there was a low response rate(15%), a wide variety of schools responded and many useful practices were demonstrated. The type of schools that responded was:

- Schools for pupils with mild Learning disability
- School for pupils with a sensory impairment
- Schools for pupils with moderate learning disability
- School for pupils with emotional Behavioural Disturbance
- School for Autism
- Mainstream schools(including pre-school)
- Hospital school

Respondents did not report any major issues with bullying in the schools with some reporting no incidents of bullying. Some special schools stated that there was not much pupil to pupil bullying in their school due to the cognitive abilities of some pupils and close supervision of children. A small number of schools mentioned staff to staff bullying which was dealt with by access to good human resource advice and development of a policy based on building healthy relationships among staff.

All schools reported that they had an Anti Bullying policy in place and that it was reviewed regularly with the majority of the respondents reviewing the policy every two years. None of the respondents left the review of this policy for any more than three years. Some of the schools reviewed the policy as part of their policy review on behaviour and discipline. All schools emphasised the importance of a whole school approach to bullying.

All schools who responded did see this issue as an important one to be tackled in all schools.

The most common form of bullying reported included:

- Name calling
- Hitting/kicking
- Cyberbullying – Texting and Facebook. This was reported as a recent development with an increasing number of incidents
- Intimidation of younger pupils
- Isolation
- Racist remarks
Other forms of bullying reported were: Aggression, pinching, teasing, undermining, family issues, verbal and physical intimidation, staff to staff bullying.

1. What changes to existing practices and policies in schools would improve how bullying can be tackled in schools?

NABMSE members had a number of suggestions for the changes that could be implemented to improve how bullying could be dealt with in schools as follows:

- All schools felt that bullying can be tackled by whole school approach with the modelling of positive behaviour and honesty among staff and between staff and pupils. This includes the encouragement of a positive working and learning environment with clear expectations and consequences of inappropriate behaviours by pupils and schools staff. This whole school approach should include the Board of Management.
- Some schools stated that there is a need for schools to have more advice, training and materials related to cyber bullying and social media in order to assist them in this ‘new’ area of bullying.
- There is a need to have a whole school approach to behaviour management.
- More community awareness of bullying and its effects. There also needs to be an awareness of what constitutes bullying.
- In-service training for all staff including training on how to deal with adult bullying.
- Making online and interactive materials available to schools. These materials should be appropriate to all students especially those with special education needs (SEN).
- Extension of the STAY SAFE Programme.
- Adoption of more programmes such as SALT and FRIENDS FOR LIFE.
- A teacher counsellor would be beneficial. Some schools find that those who bully are those students that may have issues accepting their own difficulties or have difficulties at home and would benefit by having someone other than their class teacher/principal to discuss these problems. In Scotland, there is a well established programme of guidance teachers who are trained in supporting learners experiencing difficulties in this area.
- Restorative justice has worked well in one school where teachers are trained in this approach.

2. How can awareness of bullying and its effects be raised at school level?

There were a number of suggestions from NABMSE members in this regards centring on awareness raising campaigns and training as follows:

- National Campaign to make the whole community aware of the negative effects of bullying.
- Compulsory in-service training for all staff. Some support staff may not see their role in dealing with bullying if they encounter it in the classroom or the school yard. This training should be delivered by those with expertise in the area of bullying and should include training on how to deal with adult bullying.
- Anti-Bullying Poster and brochure campaign – every class could design a poster and talk about bullying as a class.
- Topic to be raised at school assembly.
- Role play and drama including puppet theatre.
- Exploring emotions using puppetry.
- Showing of videos and presentations to demonstrate the effects.
• The development of a clear policy on bullying with the whole school community including parents involved in it’s development. This would create whole school awareness. This policy could include clear strategies on how bullying is dealt with in the school and could be part of the school’s code of behaviour.
• Regular topic at staff meetings and Board of Management meetings
• Implementation of the STAY SAFE programme and teach lessons on bullying and personal relationships as part of SPHE programme
• Raising awareness among the whole school community
• Say no to Bullying week early in the school year
• Education on diversity
• Social stories for pupils with special needs

3. **What helped your school to deal with bullying or what would have helped you to deal with it?**

It was evident from the schools who responded to the NABMSE consultations were proactive in the area of bullying. A number of strategies were employed by these schools as follows:

• Schools had a clear policy and were consistent in their approach to it’s implementation. This was in line with the positive behaviour codes displayed in the school and classrooms. This positive behaviour was also reinforced in school assemblies. Schools felt that staff need to be aware of the policy/code/and sanctions and need to apply them on a consistent basis. It is also useful to have an incident form to record occasions of bullying.
• The development of a new policy on building healthy relationships
• Having a fully understanding on what bullying is
• Having a policy of investigating all complaints – this school gets written reports from all those involved including witnesses. They do not listen to hearsay and inform parents as soon as possible
• Development of behaviour contracts with children and parents
• Invitation to the Community Gardai to talk to children especially around cyber bullying
• Teaching of the STAY SAFE programme and SPHE lessons( to explore feelings) every Autumn
• Role play works well for pupils with special education needs. It is important to use the appropriate language, tone and media to suit the needs of the child.
• Running a **No to Bullying week** in conjunction with other schools in the area
• Awareness campaign for parents regarding Cyber Bullying
• It is important to work with parents to identify the underlying contributing factors for both the child who bullies and the child who is bullied. It would be useful if the school were able to direct parents to an outside service to help them further
• The Principal in one school is trained as a trainer for anti-bullying programme and has used these resources for staff in-service
• The presence of SNAs can help enormously as they can take one child out of the situation
• Restorative justice worked well in one school that used this approach
• Using circle of truth and true/false cards to elicit details of incidents
• Encouraging an atmosphere where children are rewarded for responsible behaviour and showing care and concern for others

**What would have helped - Suggestion from schools:**

• A separate teacher/counsellor who could have taken time to do in depth anti bullying work with individuals and groups. This person could act as a home school liaison as some parents may not respond to requests to engage with the school on a particular incident
• List of useful resources for students and teachers which could be made available on DES or NEWB website. These resources should take account of the needs of the children – media, tone and language.
• More training and information for all on the issue of Cyber bullying
• Awareness campaign on the issue of cyber bullying and internet issues
• Appropriate materials for pupils with special education needs
• Access to human resource advice when dealing with staff bullying

4. **What are the key priorities that need to be addressed, including actions to be taken by the Department of Education and Skills, other government department and agencies and school communities?**

**Raising awareness and training**

• National campaign to raise awareness. Bullying is a societal issue and must be dealt with by all those concerned and not just schools
• The involvement of parents is key and parent education is also important. This would enable parents to recognise and understand bullying. These training sessions could be provided on a local or regional basis
• Inclusion of a module on bullying on the extended Initial Teacher Education programme to ensure the next generation of teachers are trained in this area
• More training of staff to explore all aspects of bullying including cyber bullying/social networking and adult bullying
• Awareness raising of the issue of the internet and abuse that can occur in this new medium
• Update the video content of the STAY SAFE Programme to make it more relevant
• Implement the FRIENDS FOR LIFE Programme in all schools to give children the skills to think positively and develop coping skills

**Involvement of other agencies**

• There was a suggestion that there could be a regional bullying officer attached to a Teacher Education centre that could act as a resource to schools when needed
• NCSE could look at this issue for children with special education needs through their research programme
• DES could support local services to look at why children behave the way they do through child counselling, art therapy etc
• Have a referral system so that children and parents get additional help e.g. linkages with the HSE Family support agencies and community agencies such as family resource centres
5. **Are there any practical steps that can be taken in the short term to improve how schools approach and tackle bullying?**

Many of these issues have been dealt with in previous sections such as training, awareness, policy development but additional ideas are as follows:

- Schools should be asked to ensure that they have an Anti Bullying Policy in place. It was suggested by some schools that this could be done by Circular letter from the Department of Education and Skills.
- Anti Bullying policy should be written in student friendly language appropriate to the needs of the students.
- Encouraging a positive learning and working environment in schools.
- Development of suitable materials for young people including those with special education needs.
- Involvement of the Board of Management in the development of policies and procedures on bullying.
- Allocation of PDST time to this issue. This may also be an issue for inclusion on SESS training.
- Update the video content of the STAY SAFE Programme to make it more relevant.
- Implement the FRIENDS FOR LIFE Programme in all schools to give children the skills to think positively and develop coping skills.

6. **Are there any exemplars of effective practice that you consider could be usefully introduced in our schools?**

There are many approaches currently used in schools and mentioned above that could be more widely introduced in the Irish context as follows:

- A teacher counsellor would be beneficial. Some schools find that those who bully, are those students that may have issues accepting their own difficulties or have difficulties at home and would benefit by having someone other than their class teacher/principal to discuss these problems. In some countries, there is a well established programme of guidance teachers who are trained in supporting learners experiencing difficulties in the area of bullying.
- A more accessible counselling service should be available to learners in schools. This could be provided by state agencies or community services such as Family Resource Centres.
- Restorative justice has worked well in one school where teachers are trained in this approach.
- Role play and drama works well for pupils with special education needs.
- There was a suggestion that there could be a regional bullying officer attached to a Teacher Education centre that could act as a resource to schools when needed.

**Other General comments made by schools:**
• Bullying is a societal issue and not just a school issue. It needs to be tackled as a society. It mainly affects children and teenagers as they try to work out their place in the world but can carry on into adulthood if not dealt with effectively.
• Bullying incidents can be stopped before they get out of hand by trained staff identifying and tackling the problem before it becomes established
• Parents are the primary educators and must be part of the solution if persistent bullying occurs
• One school suggested that perhaps there needs to be a requirement to include pupil health and well being in the school improvement planning process in addition to literacy and numeracy

Conclusion

While bullying was not widely reported among NABMSE members, there was a concern that this issue needed to be tackled on a societal basis and not just with a school programme. The importance of having a clear policy was noted and there were a number of valuable suggestions on what has worked in schools. Awareness of the issue and the importance of having appropriate materials specific to children’s needs were also noted.

The value of role play and drama was suggested as being particularly useful for pupils, especially those with special education needs.

There was acute awareness among member schools that more information and training is needed on the ‘new’ area of cyber bullying.

All schools felt it was very important to have the Board of Management, staff, pupils and parents working together in tackling any bullying incidents that may occur.
Appendix One - Questionnaire

Survey on Tackling Bullying in Schools

1. Does your school have an Anti Bullying Policy?
   Yes______  No______

2. If yes, how often is it reviewed?
   ______________________________________

3. Have you ever had to deal with incidents of bullying in your school
   Yes______  No______
   Types of Bullying Incidents dealt with_______________________________________
   _______________________________________________________________________

4. If yes what helped or what would have helped you deal with these incidents?
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5. Please give examples of good practice that have worked well in your school
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6. What changes to existing practices and policies in schools would improve how bullying can be tackled in schools?
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   _______________________________________________________________________
7. How can awareness of bullying be raised at school level?

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8. Are there key priorities that need to be addressed including action by DES, other departments/agencies and the school communities?

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9. Is there any practical steps that could be taken in the short term to assist schools in tackling the issues of Bullying?

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10. Any other comments?

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