



Transgender
Equality
Network
Ireland

Submission by Transgender Equality Network Ireland (TENI)

This submission is being made on behalf of Transgender Equality Network Ireland (TENI) on the Strategy for Education and Skills 2016-18.

Background

TENI seeks to improve conditions and advance the rights and equality of trans people and their families. Despite significant progress in the past years, Ireland remains a place where it is difficult for trans people to lead safe, healthy and integrated lives. TENI is dedicated to ending transphobia, including stigma, discrimination and inequality.

Research suggests that expressions of gender identity are commonly made in childhood and adolescence. A recent study with 32 trans children, aged 5 to 12, indicates that the gender identity of these children was deeply held and is not the result of confusion about gender identity. The researchers noted, “[O]ur results support the notion that transgender children are not confused, delayed, showing gender atypical responding, pretending, or oppositional — they instead show responses entirely typical and expected for children with their gender identity.”¹

In Ireland, there is an increasing number of transgender and gender variant young people. There is also strong evidence that transgender and gender variant young people experience high levels of bullying and discrimination in Irish schools as a result of their gender identity and gender expression.

Glossary:

Gender Identity: Refers to a person’s deeply-felt identification as male, female, or some other gender. This may or may not correspond to the sex they were assigned at birth.

Gender variant: People whose gender identity and/or gender expression is different from traditional or stereotypical expectations of how a boy/man or girl/woman ‘should’ appear or behave.

Transgender or Trans: Refers to a person whose gender identity and/or gender expression differs from the sex assigned to them at birth. This term can include diverse gender identities.

¹ Transgender Kids Show Consistent Gender Identity Across Measures (2015) Association for Psychological Science, Washington. Available here: <http://www.psychologicalscience.org/index.php/news/releases/transgender-kids-show-consistent-gender-identity-across-measures.html>

1. What improvements can be made within existing resources?

Transgender and gender variant youth are among the most vulnerable in the education system and regularly face bullying, stigmatisation and exclusion. There is a necessity for the Department of Education to give clear guidelines and policies for primary and post-primary schools to support gender variant children and adolescents. The DES should also ensure that school guidance counsellors receive training on how best to support these students, from TENI or another organisation with relevant expertise.

What improvements can be made through new provision?

To promote inclusion and diversity in our education system, there is a pressing need for a strategic approach to supporting transgender and gender variant young people. We would suggest that DES invest in the following activities:

1. **Develop a trans training programme.** DES should partner with TENI to provide awareness training on gender identity and diversity to staff through the Education Centres. This would be a strategic, pro-active and efficient way of addressing educational disadvantage and promote the active inclusion of transgender and gender variant young people.
2. **Develop training resources.** These resources would be geared towards teachers in primary and post-primary schools to facilitate a student's transition (e.g. how to inform the other students, how to deal with parents who may have questions, what are the practicalities that need to be considered).
3. **Devise a training programme for parents.** DES should partner with TENI to provide training to parents that would empower them and support them to combat transphobic bullying. This would support parents to support their children.
4. **Develop guidelines for primary and post-primary schools in relation to supporting transgender and gender variant young people.**

2. Comment on work currently being undertaken by the department in your area of interest and/or expertise (What are we doing well, what could we do better?)

There have been important developments to support transgender and gender variant young people in the education system. The recent publication 'Being LGBT in School' provided an crucial resource to post-primary schools to prevent homophobic and transphobic bullying and support LGBT young people. However, there is a pressing need for guidelines to support gender variant young people in primary schools.

TENI delivers training in schools across the country which provides much needed education and awareness to staff in how to support vulnerable students who are coming out and/or undertaking a social transition (e.g. change of name and pronoun, uniform and bathroom accommodations). Since January, TENI has delivered 15 trainings in secondary schools and 2 trainings in primary schools. These requests generally come at the behest of the school or family. TENI has also delivered training sessions at the JMB conference and will be presenting at the upcoming INTO LGBT conference. These trainings highlight the need for

schools to be proactive in developing their own knowledge-base, policies and resources rather than reactive when a student or family approaches them.

3. Are there opportunities (e.g. new areas of work) which the department should consider when developing the 2016-2018 strategy which would advance the achievement of our mission, vision and objectives across the continuum of education and skills.

The department should consider a proactive approach to supporting transgender and gender variant young people in schools. This population is particularly disadvantaged and research shows that this community faces high levels of bullying, stigma and exclusion. Goal 3 of the 'Statement of Strategy: 2016-2018' explicitly highlights the importance of supporting Inclusion and Diversity. Transgender and gender variant young people should be explicitly named in the strategy and their needs addressed through training programmes and the development of educational resources for staff. In particular, there is a clear need for increased training through the development of a Trans Training Programme which could be delivered to Education Centres across Ireland.

The department should develop an inclusive ethos in schools which promotes well-being and positive mental health, teaching equality and diversity through the Equality Act. This was done quite successfully in the programme "*All Together Now!*" that was recently piloted in 5th and 6th classes and has received excellent feedback from both teachers and students.

4. How should success on achieving our strategies be measured?

Commissioning longitudinal research would be a very good way of measuring strategies, research that would incorporate the views of schools, parents, LGBT organisations, school boards of management etc. Research that might investigate how gender diversity was managed within the schools, reactions of other parents and other parts of the community.

5. Comment on any issues relating to the continuum of education and skills in addition to your particular area of interest and/or expertise.

Allowing primary and secondary school students the space to explore their gender identity by facilitating them to express their gender identity in a way that supports them and normalises gender diversity for the other students in the classroom.

6. Any other observations that you would suggest the department should consider in the formulation of our strategy for education and skills 2016-2018.

Transgender or LGBT issues tend to be acknowledged only in reference to bullying. While transgender and gender variant young people do experience high levels of bullying, their needs in the education system must be understood in a broader sense. Unlike their gay, lesbian and bisexual peers, transgender young people have unique needs in reference to names/pronouns, uniforms, admission policies, toilet/changing facilities, sports/extra-curricular activities and so on. For this reason, it is important that transgender and gender

variant young people are seen in a holistic manner and that their needs within schools must focus on support, inclusion, promotion of mental health and wellbeing and the celebration of diversity.

TENI also suggests that the department consider the further development of an inclusive curriculum that acknowledges gender diversity. This should be done in an age-appropriate manner for students in primary and secondary schools.

7. Prioritising Early Years:

a. Comment on the approach contained in the programme for a partnership Government (are we capturing the essential issues, are there additional matters we should take into account)

We would very much welcome additional National Educational Psychologists (NEPs), who would have the appropriate training to support very young students who are gender variant, providing immediate support for critical times in a student's life, times when they may be experiencing high levels of gender dysphoria, or need to make a social transition.

b. How should progress on prioritising Early Years be measured?

c. What would you consider to be the priority actions and outcomes in this area?

Changes to the curriculum to promote awareness of gender identity and diversity and training for teaching staff to support *all* students as well as answering questions that other parents may have.

8. Tackling Disadvantaged:

a. Comment on the approach contained in the programme for for a partnership Government (are we capturing the essential issues, are there additional matters we should take into account)

Many transgender and gender variant young people drop out of school due to bullying, harassment or exclusion that they experience from peers as well as staff. Educational settings are particularly challenging for students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Differently structured courses that incorporate part-time options in the evenings or weekends, or during school breaks may be an ideal way of supporting them to return to the education system.

In our professional experience, TENI recognises that the percentage of trans young people we support who come from a disadvantaged background is relatively small compared with people from a more privileged background, we know they exist but may find it more difficult to articulate their needs and require different types of support.

b. How should progress on Tackling Disadvantages be measured?

c. What would you consider to be the priority actions and outcomes in this area?

A curriculum that promotes gender diversity, and teaching staff to have appropriate training and clear guidelines when dealing with disadvantaged trans students especially those who may be in the care system.

9. Diversity and Choice for Parents:

a. Comment on the approach contained in the programme for a partnership Government (are we capturing the essential issues, are there additional matters we should take into account)

Most schools have an ethos of social inclusion and promoting diversity, but some will use their religious ethos to exclude that diversity when they are uncomfortable with it. There is a pressing need for the education of parents which would be very beneficial in supporting an inclusive ethos.

b. How should progress on Diversity and Choice for parents be measured?

Lower levels of resistance (due to ignorance) from parents especially in the primary school setting.

c. What would you consider to be the priority actions and outcomes in this area?

TENI would very much welcome a change to admission policies. The vast majority of schools are segregated by gender. This causes significant difficulties for trans young people who change their gender designation. For instance, from female to male. Currently, a young trans man (with a female gender marker) is unable to attend a boys school but may feel uncomfortable in a girls school as the only boy. This can cause stress, anxiety and depression for this young person and their family.

In TENI's experience, the issue of school admission will continue to grow as we are seeing and increase in the amount of primary school children who are making a social transition prior to entering secondary school. This means these young people are increasingly finding themselves in schools that do not match their gender identity or lived experience. This has caused, and will cause, continued frustration, stress and exclusion among young transgender and gender variant people and their families. Currently the birth certificate is the document used for admission, but children under 16 have mechanism by which they can change their gender marker, and even if they had parents may feel pressurised to make a permanent change to their child's birth certificate before they are sure or emotionally ready, simply to satisfy an admission policy, so a change to admission documents would be a welcome change.

10. Promoting Excellence and Innovation in Schools:

- a. Comment on the approach contained in the programme for partnership Government (are we capturing the essential issues, are there additional matters we could take into account)**

Establish a pool of educators who have expertise in the area of gender identity and diversity, with continuous professional development for teachers. "Local education clusters" where knowledge and expertise of other schools' experience of supporting a trans student could be shared and built on.

- b. How should progress on promoting excellence and Innovation in schools be measured?**

Data could be collected and processed centrally (what worked well or not so well) to the benefit of all schools.

- c. What would you consider to be the priority actions and issues in this area?**
Training for all teaching staff in order to build confidence.

11. Promoting Creativity and Entrepreneurial Capacity in Students:

- a. Comment on the approach contained in the programme for partnership Government (are we capturing the essential issues, are there additional matters we could take into account)**

Many of the young people we support have mental health issues and are amongst the most vulnerable people in our community, so additional guidance counsellors with appropriate knowledge and training would be extremely welcome.

- b. How should progress on promoting creativity and entrepreneurial capacity in students be measured?**

- c. What would you consider to be the priority actions and issues in this area?**

A evaluation of transition supports and promoting initiatives that work best to support young people at critical points in their lives, for example when they are making a social transition, if they do not have adequate supports many students simply drop out of school.

12. Making better use of Educational assets within communities:

- a. Comment on the approach contained in the programme for partnership Government (are we capturing the essential issues, are there additional matters we could take into account)**

The school capital investment plan would be able to ensure that any extensions or refurbishments carried out in schools would give serious thought to the design of toilets and changing areas that would be sensitive to the needs of students with special requirements of privacy. A significant portion of transgender and

gender variant young people find the usage of toilet and changing facilities stressful as they are highly gendered areas. The introduction of single-stall, gender neutral toilets or private changing areas in new buildings would provide additional options and promote the safety and wellbeing of this population. Moreover, many students would benefit from this provision such as students with disability, certain religious or ethnic minorities, those with toileting difficulties etc.

Out of hours activities for school buildings could include LGBT safe spaces or youth groups, or Gay-Straight Alliance groups (that have been proven to work very effectively in other countries)

b. How should progress on making better use of Educational assets within communities be measured?

NA

c. What would you consider to be the priority actions and issues in this area?

Allow creative thinking about change of use of rooms/areas that could facilitate students who require personal privacy and avoid further marginalising those students in how they may be segregated from their peers.

13. Special needs Education:

a. Comment on the approach contained in the programme for partnership Government (are we capturing the essential issues, are there additional matters we could take into account)

The National Educational Psychologists Service (NEPS) seeks to promote mental health in our schools and transgender and gender variant students would be a high risk category. For this reason, additional NEPs who are suitably trained in gender identity issues would be most welcome in this respect. This would be particularly beneficial as a significant percentage of transgender and gender variant young people are also on the autistic spectrum

b. How should progress on Special needs education be measured?

c. What would you consider to be the priority actions and issues in this area?

Students with special educational or psychosocial needs to be supported in order to reach their full potential.

14. Meeting the skill needs of the future:

a. Comment on the approach contained in the programme for partnership Government (are we capturing the essential issues, are there additional matters we could take into account)

Comprehensive policies for third level, TCD already have them. Clear procedures for name changes on college documents, training for student advisors, tutors and key members of staff. Make sure that everyone is aware of the policies and identify who the key members of staff are who have relevant training.

b. How should progress on meeting the skill needs of the future be measured?

c. What would you consider to be the priority actions and issues in this area?

Appropriate training and information available to students and staff members.