

Ref: FOI: 2016/433

Dear [REDACTED]

I refer to your request of 14th November, 2016 under the Freedom of Information Act 2014 records of how often NEPS psychologists were deployed to Irish Primary and Post-Primary schools and the nature of the incidents to which they were deployed.

By way of background I might inform you that this Department's National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) provides guidelines and resource materials for schools to enable them to deal with certain traumatic events which can adversely affect pupils and school staff. The guidelines "Responding to Critical Incidents: Guidelines for Schools and resource Materials for Schools" refer to preventive approaches that schools can adopt in creating a safe and supportive environment. It also outlines how schools can plan for crises.

NEPS defines a Critical Incident as an incident or series of events that overwhelms the normal coping mechanism of the school. The kinds of critical incidents experienced by schools includes suicide or suspected suicide, death due to violence, accidental death including road traffic accidents and drowning, and death through illness. The ultimate aim of the process is to return the school to normality.

The guidelines provides practical step-by-step guidelines for teachers and principals on how to respond when a tragedy occurs. It offers support to schools at a potentially overwhelming time.

It offers a practical step by step guidance to schools in how to respond effectively when a critical incident occurs in order to minimise the potential traumatic effect on the school community. It includes templates, advice and information on how to set up a Critical Incident Management Team and develop a Critical Incident Management Plan.

They focus upon alerting schools to planning processes, structures and actions which will better allow them to cope with a traumatic incidents such as suicide or suspected suicide, murder, accidental death including road traffic accidents and drowning, and death through illness of members of the school community. In relation to suicide advice is also given on prevention and positive mental health stratagems and approaches.

The Guidelines have recently been updated and sent out to schools with new or revised information on:

- Revised section on Suicide / suspected suicide including information on suicide prevention and what schools need to do; information on preventing suicide contagion; how to compassionately deal with a suicidal student returning to school after an attempt
- Information on suicide risk and guidance where student expresses suicide ideation
- Teachers helping students in time of crisis listen, protect, connect, model and teach
- Guidance on social media use
- Useful Websites and Helplines for Accessing Resources
- Some additional information, including a comprehensive FAQ guide

During a critical incident NEPS psychologists will also, at the specific invitation of school authorities, attend at the schools following such incidents to offer direct advice and assistance to school staff and pupils. All such requests are responded to, most usually by the psychologist normally assigned to the affected school but also in some cases, depending on the particular context, by a colleague within the NEPS region and more rarely by colleagues from another NEPS region. In response to your request in this connection the attached sheet gives detail of the number of such requests that were made in the 2014/15 and 2015/16 academic years by NEPS Region and type of school affected. It does not purport to be a list of all critical incidents that occurred, just those in which school authorities contacted NEPS with a view to receiving advice and assistance.

In relation to the nature of each or any of critical incident involved I can confirm that they predominantly result from the death of a member of a given school community or close connection thereof. The actual cause of such deaths, which may be in the knowledge of, or the subject of conjecture by, those locally involved cannot be confirmed by NEPS, confirmation of cause falls within the province of other state agencies to officially term or adjudicate upon. It would be improper therefore for NEPS to utter anything which would describe the causative factors of the traumas at the basis of critical incident response, except in the most generalised terms used above.

I hope the foregoing has been of assistance to you in this matter.

Yours sincerely,

Fergal Nolan

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National Educational Psychological Service