

Report of the ACCS Education Sub-Committee 2019/2020

Members: Mr. Paul Fiorentini, President, Mr Pat McKenna, Chairperson,
Mr. Paul Thornton, Ms. Noralene Ní Urdail, Mr. Michael Brett,
Mr. James Duignan, Ms. Mary Jackson, Mr. Denis Ring, Mr. Adrian Jackson,
Mr. Patrick McVicar, Ms. Áine O’Sullivan, Assistant General Secretary and Mr. John Irwin, General Secretary.

The Education Sub-Committee works under the direction of the ACCS Executive Committee. The Sub-Committee meets regularly and reports to the Executive Committee on issues of an educational nature in our schools. The focal point of the year for the Education Sub-Committee is the Education Conference which takes place annually during the final term of the year. This conference, as well as catering for school leaders, is aimed at the practitioners who are leading learning in their classroom, subject departments and individual schools.

The Education Sub-Committee endeavours to address the issues of concern for schools that are of educational significance and impact on quality of teaching and learning as well as student service and the leading of learning.

ACCS Education Conference 2019 - Exploring Wellbeing in Community & Comprehensive Schools

“Wellbeing is present when a person realises their potential, is resilient in dealing with the normal stresses of their life, takes care of their physical wellbeing and has a sense of purpose, connection and belonging to a wider community. It is a fluid way of being and needs nurturing throughout life.”
(World Health Organisation, 2001)

“Wellbeing is comprised of many interrelated aspects including being active, responsible, connected, resilient, appreciated, respected and aware.”
(DES & NCCA, 2017)

The annual ACCS Education Conference took place on Wednesday 8th May 2019 in the Radisson Blu Hotel, Athlone, Co. Westmeath. Fifty-four schools attended this year’s event which focused on exploring wellbeing in our schools. Following the opening address by ACCS President, Paul Fiorentini, the delegates settled down to listen to this year’s keynote speaker, Fr. Peter McVerry who chose to highlight the challenges facing schools in planning for wellbeing and who reminded us of the very harsh realities facing children growing up in Ireland today. His many thought-provoking observations reminded delegates that access to wellbeing is linked closely to social class and where poverty and homelessness remain a feature of our young people’s lives, their wellbeing is often profoundly challenged and compromised. Delegates described Fr. McVerry as inspiring, impressive, powerful and challenging. In our school communities, when planning a wellbeing programme, it is important that, while working within the guidelines we recognise and understand the actual needs of those whom we serve every day.

Questions for consideration:

- How do we ensure our schools are inclusive?
- Do we understand the significance of consistency in young people’s lives which are often wholly inconsistent outside of school?
- Do we care for someone because their behaviour is acceptable to us or do we care for the person regardless of how they behave?

When asked to identify the greatest sources of stress which mitigate against wellbeing of our young people in schools, delegates prioritised the following:

1. Social Media
2. Family Circumstances
3. The School System and Examinations
4. Lack of resilience
5. Lack of connectedness
6. Peer pressure
7. Poverty/Finances

8. Anxiety
9. Poor Supports within the system for those who are struggling with Mental Health issues
10. Social Issues – drugs, alcohol dependence

School Presentations: The Donahies Community School



Paul Fiorentini, ACCS President, Caitriona Cunningham, Mateusz Kietrys, Chloe Gorman, Keely Jenkinson, Ciara Dullaghan, Michelle Horrigan, Deputy Principal and Peter Keohane, Principal, The Donahies Community School.

Teachers and students from the Donahies Community School described how the Young Social Innovators Programme is used in their school to promote a culture of Wellbeing. This presentation saw Student Voice at its finest. Junior and senior students, Mateusz Kietrys, Chloe Gorman and Keely Jenkinson spoke passionately about their efforts to evoke change in the school and wider community as they strive to create awareness about social issues and to make a real difference in the lives of others. The school has committed to a whole range of social issues including positive heart health, homelessness and cyber bullying awareness and the students described their successes in thinking differently to create solutions to these issues in their own school context. The culture of YSI in the Donahies C.S. fosters student and staff wellbeing as it promotes positive relationships between these key stakeholders and promotes authentic student voice while at the same time developing a really important skill set in young people and bolstering their self-confidence and resilience. The school is a Step-up Category Award Winner, has been awarded the School of Excellence title and has been celebrated locally with the prize of the 'Northside People School of the Year' in 2018. The students from the Donahies C.S. were so authentic. It was wonderful to see the strong rapport between teachers and students and to see how empowered the students are in this school. Their integrity was powerful as they spoke from the heart.

School Presentations: Pobalscoil na Rosann

"To nurture what is native to the soul"

School Principal, John Gorman introduced the school team from Pobalscoil na Rosann and described how the plan for the School Wellbeing Programme for 2019-2021 is deeply rooted in the values espoused in the Mission Statement.

We commit to always work in the best interests of our students and to promote their educational, personal and spiritual wellbeing in as harmonious and conducive an atmosphere as possible. We hope that all students at the RCS have the courage to be themselves, to recognise their unique talents, to be ambitious and creative, to see their value in our school community and beyond.



John Gorman, Principal, Helen McCready, Helena Cunningham, Áine O'Sullivan, Assistant General Secretary, ACCS and Patricia Graham, Pobalscoil na Rosann.

The core values of respect, encouragement, collaboration, kindness and accountability, permeate all aspects of school life and are clear in the wellbeing culture in this school community. The school prides itself on using a restorative practice approach highlighting consistency and the power of language in its everyday work. The school operates a no shouting policy which is clearly articulated in its expectations of staff, parents and students. With its focus firmly fixed on school progression and preparing its young people so that they can take their place in society and in the world of work confidently, the school has developed a comprehensive wellbeing programme linked closely to the DEIS strands and this is successfully embedded using the School Self Evaluation process. It was striking to see in the presentation by members of the Wellbeing Team the evidence of reflection and learning, the stakeholder voice and the effective use of a collaborative consultative process which identifies the real needs of this school community. The promotion of positive mental health throughout the school community is also clearly evident.

“Conversations with schools”

Tarbert Comprehensive School began its journey in exploring wellbeing in 2017 when it updated its Whole School Guidance Plan. The documenting of the work in this area led the school to consider the work that was being completed in the Wellbeing Programme in Junior Cycle. In developing the Wellbeing Programme, the school consulted with all its stakeholders in line with SSE best practice reflecting the voices of students, parents and staff and highlighting the positive relationships between all stakeholders who ultimately want the same result - the best education and opportunities for the student. While tough decisions were required by the school in redesigning the curriculum and in managing the concerns of staff and subject departments about subject status and loss of time, the school also realised quickly that a great deal of work was already being carried out in the area of wellbeing. Tough decisions require careful planning and a phased approach to change while keeping all stakeholders informed. In this regard, communication is key! The school set about documenting the decisions using the Appendix I template to guide and support its discussions. The JCT facilitated Wellbeing Day was used to great effect in identifying and exploring the needs and priorities to be addressed in a Wellbeing Programme and in adding detail to the Appendix I templates. The school is confident that the process and the programme re-establishes the need for, and the importance of wellbeing so that it is not regarded as a burdensome demand but rather as an intrinsic central way of living out the values of Tarbert Comprehensive School.

During the planning session in the afternoon, delegates were given an opportunity to share initiatives which are being used to promote a climate/culture of wellbeing in the school.

Feedback on the conference received from the delegates was excellent and the sharing of practice was commended during the conference.

The theme of the Education Conference 2020 is "Celebrating Student Voice in School Communities".

ACCS has been involved in a project with the NCCA and with its member schools since September 2018 exploring strategies and sharing initiatives which build on good practices established at school level. The conference will be a showcase event designed to highlight the wonderful work promoting and harnessing student voice in our schools. The conference will take place on 6th May 2020 in the Midlands Park Hotel, Portlaoise, Co Laois.

Other work of the Education Sub-Committee

ACCS has a representative on the Executive Committee of the NCCA, representatives on the Junior and Senior Cycle Committees and on various NCCA subject and course committees. Our representatives, while accountable to the ACCS Executive Committee, represent the voice of Community and Comprehensive Schools in the decision-making processes at this level. We wholeheartedly thank our representatives who willingly give of their time to ensure our voice is heard.

I thank all the members of the Education Sub-Committee who have given so generously of their time, expertise and enthusiasm. I would like to thank our General Secretary, John Irwin, for his support, advice and his ability to challenge us to reflect on our work. On behalf of the Sub-Committee I would like to acknowledge and thank the Assistant General Secretary, Áine O'Sullivan, for her central role in inspiring, driving and enthusiastically supporting the work of the committee.

And finally, a thank you to Paul Crone for his work on this committee over the last number of years and wish him well with his new role with CDET.B.

*Mr. Pat McKenna,
Chairperson.*