



## **To: Management Authorities of Second Level Schools**

### **Guidelines on Violence in schools**

#### **1. Background**

The Minister for Education and Science wishes to bring to the attention of school management authorities his concern about incidents of violence towards staff in second level schools. As in other workplaces, staff in second level schools may be victims of violence. During the course of their work, school staff may be at risk in the form of verbal abuse, threats, assaults or other forms of intimidation. This behaviour may come from pupils, parents, guardians, other staff members or visitors.

While it may not be possible to prevent all incidents of violence, it is possible to reduce the risk of such incidents occurring and to minimise their consequences. Effective school policies concerning a range of issues can have a positive effect on reducing the threat of violence in schools. The close interaction of the school management with staff and parents in developing effective school policies on school discipline, bullying and health and safety contributes to a positive school environment where mutual respect, co-operation and natural justice are accepted features of the school community by all.

While the level of reported incidents of violence in schools is low, the Minister is anxious that every effort be made to create and maintain a culture in schools where acts of violence are not tolerated and where incidents, when they do occur, are effectively and speedily dealt with.

In this context, the Department of Education and Science wishes to draw the attention of School Management Authorities to the following issues:

- the duty of School Management Authorities to provide a safe environment for employees and other persons present in the school
- measures to be taken to prevent or minimise the risk of assaults on teachers/Principals/Deputy Principals or other staff employed in schools
- measures to be taken in support of staff who have been assaulted or threatened with assault; and ensuring that appropriate action is taken to safeguard against a recurrence.

## **2. Duty of Management Authorities to Provide a Safe School Environment**

The Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act, 1989 and the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work (General Application) Regulations, 1993 require school management authorities in their role as employers to ensure the safety and health of their employees.

This imposes a duty of care not alone for employees but also for other persons present in the school. The legislation sets out a framework within which employers can secure the safety, health and welfare of employees and others. It requires employers to draw up a Safety Statement by:

- ◆ identifying the hazards
- ◆ assessing the risks to health and safety
- ◆ putting in place appropriate safeguards.

In the Education Sector, violence should be considered as a potential hazard and assessed accordingly. Where there is a risk to health and safety from violence, appropriate safeguards must be put in place. Account should be taken of the specific circumstances that pertain in each school.

There should be consultation with those at risk concerning the measures to be taken and the monitoring of their effectiveness. Information should be given to staff on protection and preventative measures which are essential to their safety.

The Safety, Health and Welfare at Work (General Application) Regulations 1993, include provision that the Health and Safety Authority must be notified of incidents which:

- result in an employee being unable to work for 3 or more consecutive days
- result in an injury to a non-employee requiring medical treatment

The legislation requires that all incidents are recorded internally by the school.

## **3. General duties on employees**

The Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act, 1989 and the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work (General Application) Regulations, 1993 place a general duty on employees not to endanger themselves or others through their acts or omissions while at work. They must co-operate with their employer to enable him/her comply with health and safety legislation. In the context of a school, this would include a duty to follow procedures laid down by the management authority.

## **4. Preventative Measures**

It is recognised that measures taken by schools to reduce the threat of violence should be commensurate with the perceived risk of violence and proportionate to the needs of each school.

A system of regular review of the effectiveness of school policies in attention of the school community on matters which may be giving rise to fear, frustration, tension and communication difficulties within the school. The early identification and

resolution of weaknesses in school policies generally lessens the threat of violence over a wide area of school business. Such reviews should be as inclusive as possible and involve school management, staff, pupils and parents, as appropriate.

School Management Authorities are urged to consider, agree and implement procedures which would prevent or minimise the risk of violence to employees and others present in the school. These procedures should be reviewed regularly.

The procedures relate to external liaison and internal organisation issues.

#### **(a) External liaison**

##### **◆ Provision of information to parents/guardians**

Bearing in mind that communication between home and school should be frequent, open and positive, School Management Authorities, in consultation with the Principal and staff of the school, should promote good practice for the conduct of communication between home and school.

In this context school authorities should develop and circularise parents as appropriate, regarding policies and procedures in relation to visits to the school; meetings with teachers; school discipline; and complaint procedures.

#### **(b) Internal School Procedures**

Internal school procedures should be kept under review to reduce exposure to incidents of violence within the school.

##### **◆ Admitting parents/visitors to the school**

Parents/visitors who wish to have a consultation with a class teacher should be encouraged to make a prior appointment with the relevant teacher. In urgent cases where a pre-arranged appointment is not appropriate, parents should, in the first instance, report to the school secretary/Principal. The practice of parents approaching classrooms directly during teaching time should be expressly discouraged. Specifically, access to teachers should be on an " appointment only " basis. Where sensitive issues are the subject of discussion, arrangements should be made for conducting such interviews in privacy.

Conducting interviews at the classroom door, while simultaneously supervising a class of children, is not conducive to open communication. Particular care should be taken to ensure that parent/teacher consultations do not take place within the hearing of other pupils and/or parents.

##### **◆ Arrangements for parent/teacher meetings**

Arrangements for the conduct of formal parent teacher meetings should be addressed in the School Plan. Parents should be given adequate notice regarding the timing of such meetings and encouraged to raise issues of concern.

##### **◆ Disciplinary issues**

Under the terms of Circular M33/91, School Management Authorities are responsible for ensuring that a fair and efficient code of behaviour, encompassing rules,

sanctions and procedures, is drawn up and applied in the school. The Code should be developed by the Principal and the staff in consultation with parents and approved by the School Management Authority. Parents should be circularised regarding the Code when it is finalised.

This Code should have as its aim the maintenance of desirable standards of behaviour, particularly in fostering understanding and co-operation between teachers, pupils and parents in helping schools to adapt to the needs of its students while establishing the basis for responsible actions by its students and observing the principles of natural justice. Any sanction imposed on a pupil should be in accordance with the Code of Discipline. Procedures for suspending pupils should be clearly set out in the school's Code of Discipline and should be adhered to. In the suggested Code of Discipline circulated with M33/91, aggressive, threatening or violent behaviour towards a teacher is regarded as serious or gross misbehaviour and may warrant suspension.

A new subject - Civic, Social and Political Education - has been part of the core Junior Cycle Curriculum since September 1997. In addition, the NCCA is developing a syllabus for Social, Personal and Health Education, which will incorporate previous programmes developed in the Department. A central aim of these programmes is to nourish positive mental health in young people so that they will neither perpetrate nor condone any sort of violence against others.

#### ◆ **Complaints Procedure**

Pending the introduction of an agreed national procedure, School Management Authorities should have in place a clear procedure, in accordance with the principles of natural justice, for the processing of complaints from parents/guardians. Parents should be informed of these procedures.

#### ◆ **Other internal organisational issues**

Other internal organisational issues to be considered by the school and action taken where appropriate:

- ◆ increase awareness among school staff of school policies in relation to discipline, bullying, health and safety and associated areas including the threat of violence through talks and discussion at staff meetings
- ◆ restrict access by visitors to the school, its environs and to certain areas within the school
- ◆ use of signs within the schools grounds and premises
- ◆ require all visitors to report to a designated area in the school, e.g. the reception area
- ◆ use of visitors badges
- ◆ create an awareness in the school that all visitors should wear badges so that unknown individuals are identified quickly and appropriate action taken
- ◆ safeguards for school property
- ◆ security measures in the school.

It is recommended that specific consideration should be given to situations where any school staff are: -

- ◆ handling cash
- ◆ working alone on the school premises
- ◆ working in an isolated part of the school premises
- ◆ engaged in out of class activities
- ◆ working with pupils with behavioural difficulties
- ◆ engaged in home visiting
- ◆ away from school with students

In exceptional circumstances, schools may consider it appropriate to provide training for staff to assist them:

- ◆ in identifying and avoiding potentially violent situations and
- ◆ in calming down potentially violent situations.

## **5. Steps to be followed in the event of an alleged assault**

School Management Authorities should develop a clearly defined procedure to be implemented in the event of an alleged assault on any person present in the school. This policy should include a clear commitment on the part of the school management authorities to be fully supportive of victims of violence within the school.

It is accepted that judgement will have to be exercised in each case. However, the following elements should be included in each procedure:

- (i) In the event of an assault, a staff member should not try to resist if cash or goods are the obvious motive for the attack. Depending on the circumstances, the member should endeavour to calm down the assailant and seek assistance as quickly as possible.
- (ii) The incident should be immediately reported to the school Principal/Deputy Principal/Manager as appropriate and the person with responsibility for health and safety issues in the school.
- (iii) Support and counselling must be available to all victims who need it. This can be of an informal nature from colleagues or more formalised from appropriately trained professionals. Some useful contact addresses are given below. Where necessary, immediate medical assistance should be sought.
- (iv) The matter should be reported to the Gardaí, where appropriate. This report would normally be made by the teacher who was assaulted.
- (v) The details of the incident should be recorded in an Incident Book kept for this purpose in the school. The information recorded should include personal details (name, age, occupation) of victim and assailant where available;

description of what happened; the circumstances giving rise to the incident; when and where it happened; description of any injuries sustained; weapons used; and establish which school procedure failed, if any. Situations in which staff members have been intimidated or threatened with physical violence should also be recorded. Reports should also be made to the Health & Safety authority as required.

- (vi) The School Management Authorities should be notified of the incident and where necessary an emergency meeting of the School Management Authority should take place. The School Management Authority should consider notifying its legal advisors and insurance company of the incident as appropriate.
- (vii) Where the alleged assault is by a pupil the matter should be dealt with in accordance with the school's Code of Discipline.
- (viii) Students who show a tendency to resort to violent behaviour should be discussed with their parents, teachers, the guidance counsellor, if available and with the relevant Department of Education & Science psychologist. In some cases, a psychological assessment may be considered to be appropriate and/or a referral to one of the clinical agencies.
- (ix) Where the alleged assault is committed by a parent/guardian or visitor, the person should be immediately instructed in writing not to make direct contact with the teacher/school pending full consideration and investigation of the matter by the School Management Authority. Subsequently the School Management Authority should correspond with the parent/guardian stating:
  - that it considers the assault unacceptable
  - what action the School Management Authority intends to take
  - outlining what pre-conditions should be met before access to the school is restored.
- (x) Applications for leave of absence by teaching staff, in relation to a staff member who has been assaulted, should be forwarded to the Teachers' Division, Department of Education and Science, Cornamaddy, Athlone, Co. Westmeath. In the case of VEC staff, applications should be addressed to the Committee concerned. Each application will be assessed on its merits.
- (x) Where the alleged assault is committed by a staff member, the member should be immediately instructed in writing not to make direct contact with the victim pending full consideration and investigation of the matter by the School Management Authority. The question of suspension may also need to be considered prior to further action/disciplinary measures being taken.
- (xi) The implications of incidents of violence for school policies in the areas of discipline, bullying and health and safety and related areas should be considered. In addition, the school should consider the adequacy and effectiveness of support measures in place for victims of violence within the school.

## **6. Clarification**

In this Circular the term School Management Authority/ies refers to Boards of Management, Manager and Vocational Education Committee as appropriate.

## **Further information**

### **(i) Health and Safety Authority**

The Health & Safety Authority, 10 Hogan Place, Dublin 2 Tel. (01) 6620400, Fax (01) 6620417 is the national body charged with overall responsibility under the Act for the promotion of occupational health and safety. The Authority has regional offices in Athlone, Cork, Drogheda, Galway, Limerick, Sligo and Waterford. The Authority has a series of publications on various aspects of health and safety including guidance on the legislation, pamphlets on violence at work and the preparation of safety statements and bullying at work. In addition, the Report of the Advisory Committee on the Education Sector published in December 1995 includes a sample Safety Statement and is available from the Authority.

### **(ii) Department's Psychological Service**

The Department's Psychological Service, shortly to be established as an Executive Agency of the Department, (National Educational Psychological Service), will be available as a support service to schools in relation to Individual students with difficulties and to the promotion of good mental health generally within the school.

### **(iii) Department publications**

Circular M33/91 – Guidelines towards a positive policy for school behaviour and discipline

Report to the Minister for Education on Discipline in schools (Maeve Martin – 1997). This Report, which was circulated to all schools, identifies models of good practice and strategies for the promotion and maintenance of quality discipline in schools.

Guidelines on countering bullying behaviour in Primary and Post-Primary schools.

### **(iv) Employee Assistance Service for Teachers**

The Employee Assistance Service is operating on a pilot basis for teachers in three designated areas – Dublin City and County, Cork City and County and Galway, Mayo, Roscommon. Employee Assistance Officers provide a confidential support and referral service to staff and management in primary and second level schools on a wide variety of problems and difficulties arising both within and outside the workplace.

The contact addresses and telephone numbers are:

Cork:

Employee Assistance Service,  
Robert Scott House,  
6, St Patrick's Quay,  
Cork (021 - 552442).

Dublin:

Employee Assistance Service,  
Senior House,  
All Hallows,  
Gracepark Road,  
Drumcondra,  
Dublin 9 (01 - 8570209).

Galway:

Employee Assistance Service,  
10, Calbro House,  
Tuam Road,  
Galway (091 - 773242/773243).

**(vi) The Irish Association for Counselling and Therapy**

The Irish Association for Counselling and Therapy, 8 Cumberland Street, Dun Laoghaire, Co Dublin (01-2300061) maintain a database of accredited counsellors throughout Ireland. The Association provides names of counsellors by region and information concerning their area of expertise, qualifications, charges and if the counsellor sees adults, children or groups.

**(vii) Victim Support**

Victim Support (Headquarters: Haliday House, 32 Arran Quay, Dublin 7 Telephone: 01-8780870; branches nationwide) provides support for victims of crime generally. The organisation also runs a youth awareness programme to sensitise young people to the effects of crime.

**8. Dissemination of Circular**

You are requested to ensure that copies of this circular are provided to the appropriate representatives of parents and teachers for transmission to individual parents and teachers.

Edward Ward  
Assistant Principal

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