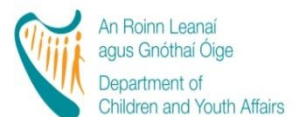




Kilkenny Comhairle na nÓg Mental Health School Flag project – an evaluation

Gerry Jeffers



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Written by Gerry Jeffers

This report is dedicated to the memory of Tom Hunt, educator, 1943-2016.

Tom Hunt worked as a teacher in the City Vocational School, Kilkenny from 1972 to 1980 when he became vice principal in Scoil Airegeal, Ballyhale. He served as President of the Teachers' Union of Ireland in 1980-81. He was Principal in Scoil Airegeal from 1990 to 2008. Throughout his life, Tom was an enthusiastic, committed and effective advocate for young people's rights and wellbeing.

Viewpoints

‘Our vision is for Ireland to be one of the best small countries in the world in which to grow up and raise a family, and where the rights of all children and young people are respected, protected and fulfilled; where their voices are heard and where they are supported to realise their maximum potential now and in the future’. *Government of Ireland, 2014*

‘...an educational environment is a very good place to influence young people’s views on mental health’. - *Paul Gilligan CEO, St Patrick’s University Hospital*

‘We want young people to have better coping skills in dealing with issues affecting their mental health. As school is where they spend a significant amount of their young lives, it’s only fitting that school is an environment where young people feel supported and safe. We think this can’t be ‘spoofed’ – it needs to be a whole school approach. Only through real, innovative, fun and genuine efforts by the school to involve young people in talking about their mental health will this be achieved. We need to reach the point where all young people feel that it’s ok not to be ok’.
The Kilkenny Comhairle na nÓg Mental Health School Flag project, School Guidelines

‘One of the things I really like about the Comhairle na nÓg project is that it offers activities that can work with all years throughout the school. I like the idea of getting a flag to make a public statement that the school has taken mental health issues seriously’. - ‘*Aisling*’, *former Comhairle na nÓg member*

‘One of the things that impresses me about the project is the peer support dimension. Whether the issues are to do with bullying, exam stress, loss and death or LGBT, peer support can make a big difference.’ - *Angela Campion, Pilot Project Manager*

‘I believe that we are addressing mental challenges very well. However, this is not a fixed state and as mental health is an evolving and changing aspect of each person’s overall well-being, the response by the school needs to evolve and change’. - *Principal, ‘Siskin School’*

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Foreword

Children and teenagers spend approximately a third of their childhoods in school. Their experiences here impact immensely on their emotional well-being and development. In particular, this experience has a major bearing on how they view themselves socially and intellectually, and whether they believe they are clever, good at achieving things and popular. Their experiences in school teach them how to get on with others, how to work and how to compete. For this reason, it is very important that school provides children with the best opportunity for them to protect and enhance their emotional health. Academic achievement is secondary to this key priority and indeed without emotional health academic achievement often becomes irrelevant.

This is why St Patrick's Mental Health Services supports the Kilkenny Comhairle na nÓg Mental Health Flag Project. The project's aims, the promotion of mental health education in schools and empowering young people to advocate for mental health rights, are consistent with SPMHS Empowering Recovery strategic objectives.

The report provides an overview of the impact and effectiveness of the Mental Health School Flag Project. This research indicates that awareness among teachers of how they impact on the emotional wellbeing of students is high, and many schools already run a number of wellbeing initiatives. It indicates that teachers and students would benefit further from a framework for these initiatives that will complement the school curriculum.

This report highlights the need for a national approach for mental health education, and offers a framework on how to achieve this. The recommendations within the key findings, such as involving young people in the development of initiatives, the examination of language used when talking about mental health to students, and the benefit of collaboration amongst

schools are timely given the recent launch by Minister for Mental Health and Older People Helen McEntee of the National Taskforce on Youth Mental Health.

The on-going development of St Patrick's Mental Health Services' school strategy, through our advocacy initiative Walk in My Shoes, highlights the willingness of the school community to increase its capacity in the area of mental health.

Over the past number of years Walk in My Shoes has delivered a series of resources for schools, including a mental health education film for primary and secondary schools, a #MindYourSelfie mental health resource pack for teachers, and the provision of a dedicated Mental Health Outreach Officer available to visit schools throughout the country.

I wish to congratulate Kilkenny Comhairle na nÓg for their commitment and dedication for developing an innovative and progressive initiative which will impact on the mental health of many young people.

**Paul Gilligan, CEO
St Patrick's Mental Health Services**



Introduction

In recent years many radical and innovative approaches have emerged in addressing the multiplicity of mental health challenges faced by young people in what seems to be a pressurised and rapidly shifting World. These challenges are compounded by a myriad of outside influences that weren't part of school culture in the past; social media, being the most notable.

When Kilkenny Comhairle na nÓg members pitched their idea of a Mental Health Flag for Schools to our steering committee following their AGM in 2012, it was met with one part apprehension and one part excitement. The journey that these inspirational young people have taken since then has been impressive. It has been an exhaustive search for new ways of engaging young people to take control of their mental health. Developing the mental health flag project also attempts to challenge all of us who hold positions of responsibility for the wellbeing of young people to work tirelessly towards a common aim of putting in place stuff that works and is proven to work.

This evaluation report attempts to encapsulate that journey and to reflect on a process that in the view of our steering committee could prove invaluable in contributing to how we collectively approach the challenge of whole school approaches to mental and emotional wellbeing. What has been evaluated here is a body of work that was imagined, designed and animated by a group of young people involved in Kilkenny Comhairle na nÓg since 2012. That's pretty impressive! If ever there was a need for an exemplar for participation in Comhairle or indeed for the value of listening to the voices of young people in developing plans or programmes for young people, then look no further than here.

All Comhairle members involved in this project were thoughtful and provocative, highly motivated and singular in their collective vision. The future is safe.

It is my hope that this evaluation report will prove useful for all who work towards the mental wellbeing of our young people; not just in our schools but in the wider community too. If anything the process itself has proven useful in gaining a deeper understanding of the complexities of working with young people and mental health in the school environment and bringing together the disparate strands needed for that work to be consistent, sustainable and above all, safe. I think the work that our Comhairle members have done will prove an important step in reaching our collective goal and towards helping our young people to go out into the World, confident and filled with purpose and happiness.

Cllr Malcolm Noonan

Chairperson of the Kilkenny Comhairle na nÓg Steering Committee

Executive Summary

The Mental Health Flag Programme is a framework for schools to ensure that mental health and mental health awareness is an integral part of the school environment. The initiative is the brainchild of the 2012 Kilkenny Comhairle na nÓg; their concern that schools should have a well thought-out framework for supporting young people's wellbeing is a significant one. The framework was developed by a collaborative process and three post-primary schools piloted the project during the 2014-15 school year. The pilot project was evaluated in the Autumn 2015 and included interviews with a range of participants and other stakeholders. All post-primary schools in County Kilkenny were also contacted and invited to take part in a short survey of attitudes towards mental health and the flag project.

Teacher and student engagement with the framework points to the centrality of mental health as 'the number one health issue for young people' (Dooley and Fitzgerald, 2012). There is also evidence that 'Schools can provide a safe and supportive environment for building life skills and resilience and a strong sense of connectedness to school' (DES/HSE,DOH, 2103).

The evidence from participants in the pilot project points to the effectiveness of the framework in supporting schools to address wellbeing issues. In particular, the contributions of the students in the focus group interviews confirm the relevance and immediacy of the initiative. Schools were keen to point out that they are already engaged in an impressive range of activities that can be grouped under a 'wellbeing' or 'mental health' umbrella, particularly through curricular activities and pastoral structures. The framework adds further impetus and focus. The six-month pilot project was short and would have benefitted with a longer lead-in, planning period.

Schools are quite nuanced in how they regard the issues. For example, while many welcome 'outside' speakers, some also express a wariness about 'well-intentioned' individuals and organisations. Such reservations are rooted in poor previous experiences of invited guest speakers. Interviews with school principals underline how traumatic critical incidents such as a suicide can be for the whole school community. Some contend that the sensitive nature of the topic of 'mental health' demands greater care about language usage; 'wellbeing' is sometimes suggested as a more appropriate term. Such sensitivity also leads to discomfort among some about awarding a 'flag' for addressing a core part of a school's mission; the negative connotations of 'flag-waving' were mentioned. However, reservations about a flag are often accompanied by very positive opinions about the programme and framework. Strong support for a wellbeing award, perhaps with more focus on intentionality and processes than on achievements, emerges from the evaluation. As originally conceived, the project regarded each school as a stand-alone entity. Consideration should be given to greater collaboration between schools

on well-being issues. The original aspiration to engage with primary schools should not be forgotten; lessons learned through the pilot project could inform further developments in primary schools. This pilot project also underlines the case for stronger links between schools and Comhairle na nÓg.

Building on the pilot project and on this evaluation, opportunities now exist for government departments in particular to advance an award related framework for positive mental health in schools at regional and national levels.

Finally, the evidence from this evaluation challenges schools to look at their current policies and practices regarding well-being and mental health, to recognise the continually changing environments in which young people live and to be imaginative and innovative in their curricular, pastoral and extra-curricular responses.

List of abbreviations used in the text

AGM	Annual General Meeting
ASIST	Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training
CAHMS	Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services
CSPE	Civic Social and Political Education
DCYA	Department of Children and Youth Affairs
DEIS	Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools
DES	Department of Education and Skills
DoH	Department of Health
DVD	Digital Video Disc (or Digital Versatile Disc)
GAA	Gaelic Athletic Association
HSCL	Home School Community Liaison
HSE	Health Service Executive
IGC	Institute of Guidance Counsellors
JCSP	Junior Certificate Schools Programme
LGBT	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender
MHAI	Mental Health Awareness Initiative
MHSF	Mental Health School Flag
NEPS	National Educational Psychological Service
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
RE	Religious Education
RSE	Relationships and Sexuality Education
SPHE	Social, Personal and Health Education
TY	Transition Year

Section 1 Background and Context

Comhairle na nÓg has its origins in the National Children's Strategy in 2000 which in turn arose from Ireland's ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989). Comhairlí na nÓg are child and youth councils in the 34 local authorities of the country, which give children and young people the opportunity to be involved in the development of local services and policies. A Comhairle na nÓg comprises young people aged 12-18 years, elected at an annual AGM to represent their respective electoral area on issues affecting young people.

Kilkenny Comhairle na nÓg is made up of young representatives from the four electoral areas in Kilkenny: Castlecomer, Kilkenny East and West and Piltown. The group meets on average every three weeks to discuss issues and establish a way with local decision makers to resolve those issues that affect the majority of young people.

The Mental Health School Flag concept was identified through discussions at the AGM of Kilkenny Comhairle na nÓg in October 2012. Its development has formed a substantial part of each annual work plan of the Comhairle na nÓg. Over the course of 2013 and 2014 the project has been developed by a collaborative process of engagement led by subsequent Kilkenny Comhairlí with young people, mental health professionals, Kilkenny Comhairle na nÓg Steering Committee and Lifeline Mental Health Youth Sub-Group. The Mental Health School Flag Project is a framework for schools to ensure that mental health and mental health awareness is an integral part of the school environment.

Having devised the framework, the next stage was to undertake a pilot project. This began in January 2015. Angela Campion was engaged as manager of the pilot project and given a six-month contract. The initial plan was to engage with six identified schools, three primary and three post-primary. Due to a variety of circumstances participation in the pilot project was mixed and centred on the three post-primary schools. Schools appointed local project co-ordinators who applied the framework to their particular contexts.

This evaluation of the pilot project was commissioned through St Patrick's Mental Health Services in late September 2015. The researcher met the Comhairle Steering Committee on five occasions. Some initial findings were presented to the Comhairle Steering Committee in

November and, a week later, to Ms Madge O’Callaghan, Youth Advocacy Platform Co-ordinator in St Patrick’s Hospital and two of her colleagues. A draft report was completed and circulated to the relevant parties in December 2015. Feedback on the draft report and suggestions made at meetings with the Comhairle Steering Committee in May and June 2016 were incorporated into a revised draft prior to publishing. A revised report was completed in July 2016.

Section 2: Methodology used in the evaluation

The first stage was to consult some recent relevant literature regarding young people and mental health, particularly in an Irish context. Central themes were identified and resonances with the themes that had emerged in the initial meeting with the Comhairle Steering Committee were noted in particular.

The next stage was to interview key participants. This included the pilot project co-ordinator, school-based co-ordinators, a psychotherapist who had been consulted in the early stages of the project, the Director of the Kilkenny Education Centre. These interviews involved a combination of face-to-face sessions and telephone interviews. A visit to one of the school involved focus groups interviews with two groups of students as well as conversations with the Principal, Deputy Principal and teachers. A member of the Comhairle Steering Committee facilitated a meeting between the evaluator and some young people who had been on previous Comhairlí. Paul Gilligan, CEO of St Patrick's Mental Health Services, the funders of the evaluation, was also interviewed.

Telephone conversations with some school principals alerted the evaluator to a wide range of views. Phone calls to all schools were followed by an e-mail to each school posing five questions as set out below:

1. What do you already know about the Kilkenny Comhairle na nÓg Mental Health School Flag project?
2. In your opinion, how well do you think your particular school is addressing mental health challenges currently (select one): A. Very well. B. Satisfactory. C. We could do better. D. We could do a lot better.
3. What programmes, subjects, strategies or other initiatives are, in the experience of your school community, particularly effective in addressing mental health issues?
4. What might be the advantages of a mental health flag for schools?
5. Do you see any disadvantages/problems with a mental health flag for schools?

14 of the 16 schools engaged with the process. Some responded briefly by e-mail, others in more detail both by e-mail and on the telephone. Some of the responses are presented in Appendix 2.

The data emerging from the various sources - - all gathered in October, November and December 2015 - were analysed and key themes identified.

Schools are busy places and school leaders often feel inundated with requests to take part in numerous surveys and pieces of research. It is worth noting that the various people mentioned above engaged well with this process, itself an indicator of the relevance, even urgency, with which they regard youth mental health issues.

Given each school's uniqueness, it is always difficult to maintain total anonymity when reporting on almost any aspect of a school's activity. Each school was allocated a fictitious name, after a bird, primarily in the hope that the reader will focus on schools' engagement with mental health issues rather than on specific, named schools.

Section 3: Mental Health and young people – a growing concern

‘The number one health issue for young people is their mental health’, begins the *‘My World Survey: National Study of Youth Mental Health in Ireland* (Dooley and Fitzgerald, 2012, vii).

The report also states that

‘Good mental health in adolescence is a requirement for optimal psychological development, the development and maintenance of productive social relationships, effective learning, an ability to care for oneself, good physical health, and effective economic participation as adults’. (ibid, vii).

The *My World Survey* concluded that between the ages of 12 and 25 young people are particularly vulnerable. While the majority of young people studied were found to be functioning well across a variety of mental health indicators, the researchers noted that mental health difficulties emerged in early adolescence and peaked in the late teens and early 20s. They state:

This peak in mental health difficulties, in general, was coupled with a decrease in protective factors such as self-esteem, optimism and positive coping strategies’ (ibid, p. viii).

Dooley and Fitzgerald identified five themes related to key mental health indicators. They are

One Good Adult’ is important in the mental well-being of young people.

Excessive drinking has very negative consequences for the mental health and adjustment of young people.

Young adults’ experiences of financial stress are strongly related to their mental health and well-being.

Rates of suicidal thoughts, self-harm and suicide attempts were found to be higher in young adults who did not seek help or talk about their problems.

Talking about problems is associated with lower mental health distress and higher positive adjustment.

It’s also clear that school is a vital arena for young people’s well-being and that teachers can be the ‘one good adult’ mentioned above. National and international research has consistently shown that the classroom teacher is the best placed professional to work sensitively and consistently with pupils to effect educational outcomes (Clarke and Barry, 2010; Payton et al. 2008; WHO, 2012).

The seriousness of the topic is also evident in *‘Well-being in Post-Primary Schools, Guidelines for Mental Health Promotion and Suicide prevention’*, published by Department

of Education and Skills/Health Service Executive/Department of Health Ireland in January 2013. The Foreword asserts:

‘Schools play a vital role in the promotion of positive mental health in young people. Schools can provide a safe and supportive environment for building life skills and resilience and a strong sense of connectedness to school. The fostering of healthy relationships with peers, teachers and school staff is essential to a young person’s positive experience of school and their cognitive and emotional development. The needs and well-being of school staff also need to be considered and supported. Education about mental health and well-being is an integral part of the school curriculum. It is especially important to address the myths and stigma surrounding mental health and suicide, which for many young people are barriers to seeking support’.

The 2013 *Guidelines*, based on national and international evidence and best practice, adopt a whole-school approach to well-being and mental health¹. The focus is on the entire school community, not just individual young people with identified needs.

Re-imagining schools as supportive environments is also evident in the *A Framework for Junior Cycle* (DES, 2012). A new emphasis on the skills of managing self, staying well, communicating, being creative, managing information and thinking, and working with others can be seen as highlighting well-being.

However, as Gleeson (2004, p.105), has argued, despite the rhetoric of innovation in Irish schooling in recent decades, ‘little has changed in the culture of our schools or in classroom practice’. Indeed, aspirations like those in the well-being guidelines and proposed Junior Cycle reform must be juxtaposed with the consequences of practical decisions such as the 2012 cut to guidance and counselling in schools (IGC, 2013) and the persistent stress that derives from the schooling system itself (Banks and Smyth, 2015). In other words, the reality on the ground in schools can be quite different from what is written in policy documents. In the arena of mental health and well-being close attention needs to be paid to the experiences of young people in schools.

¹ A further useful resource for schools is Maeve O’Brien’s (2008) review of the well-being literature which concludes that in the context of second level schooling ‘valuing happiness and well-being (in whatever shape they may be understood) does count and make a difference’

Section 4: Why a Mental Health School Flag?

According to the DES/HSE/DoH (2012, p.4) guidelines, mental health is defined as ‘a state of well-being in which the individual realises his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively, and is able to make a contribution to his or her own community’.

The views of young people who have been members of Comhairle na nÓg Kilkenny are especially relevant. Brian² was a member of the Second Comhairle and is now at university. He believes strongly in the importance of schools having a well thought-out framework for supporting young people’s wellbeing.

‘I think it’s especially important in 1st year and 2nd year. You need to learn that just because you had a bad day doesn’t mean you have to have other bad days’, he says. ‘A lot of people I observed in school had a rough time in 1st year. I think schools need to help young people to talk more about issues like bullying and depression. And we, the Irish, don’t seem to be that good at talking about such issues, especially young men. Yes, we had SPHE in school but my memory is of teachers going through stuff because they had to, often just reading from the book. Ten minutes on depression is not enough and nobody wants to be the guy in SPHE who admits to having problems. I’d like to see more initiatives that get people talking, even among friends.

I do remember some speakers coming in and the best ones were when people spoke honestly about their own experiences. I think it is really important that speakers going in to schools talking about mental health issues should be able to engage with their audiences. I would suggest a team of say ten young people who would listen to potential speakers and vet them, approve them for going in to schools. Usually the decision to invite in a speaker is made by adults without any consultation with young people. Maybe that’s a role this project could take on’, he suggests.

‘I think the core idea of the mental health project is very good. It’s a pity it didn’t work out at primary level. I thought there was good enthusiasm from schools at the meetings and we did get useful feedback. I think the framework set out for schools is good. It just needs to move on into more schools’, he says.

Aisling³ was a member of the first Comhairle na nÓg in Kilkenny and remembers the simplicity of the original suggestion at the AGM. ‘My recollection is that the point was made that the Green Flag had

² Pseudonym

³ Pseudonym

done a lot of good for environmental awareness in schools, so why not a flag for mental health awareness. We on the Comhairle were very enthusiastic about making it a reality. We were all agreed that it is a very important topic for schools to address. Young people can get very caught up with stress, maybe due to bullying, exams, homework, even teachers in schools. I don't think enough is being done. We had a sports week every year and mental health issues were mentioned. Yes, we had SPHE from 1st to 3rd year but nothing after that. In TY there was some emphasis on wellbeing and general physical and mental health but no emphasis at all in 5th and 6th year. I don't think that's right. We had occasional speakers who came in.

‘One of the things I really like about the Comhairle na nÓg project is that it offers activities that can work with all years throughout the school. I like the idea of getting a flag to make a public statement that the school has taken mental health issues seriously’, she concludes.

A psychotherapeutic viewpoint

One of those consulted in the early stages of the project was psychotherapist Gordon Lynch. He recalls that he was enthusiastic from the outset.

‘I saw it as a practical way of encouraging schools to increase awareness of the importance of positive mental health’, he says. From his work as a consultant, with the HSE and with the Jigsaw service of Headstrong⁴, he is convinced of the importance of early intervention when young people encounter mental health issues. ‘I have seen a lot of situations where matters were sorted at an early stage because young people could have a conversation with an adult. Simple interventions where they can talk about their worries can be very powerful. It can be a teacher in school, a trainer in the local GAA club, someone they can trust.. People don't need to have a professional background to make a difference. Schools can play a big role in preventing problems worsening to the stage of needing medical intervention. For me, that was a very appealing feature of the idea of a framework for schools to address mental health’, he says.

‘Of course, mental health is a difficult topic’, continues Gordon. ‘Many have conflicted attitudes and mixed emotions, sometimes because of how people they know have been affected. I am aware from elsewhere in the country of how tragedies and critical incidents can be overwhelming for schools. As I see it, a flag is a way of making a statement that, as a community, we encourage the idea of positive mental health. The fact that if, despite everyone's best efforts, incidents occur doesn't negate the value of making the statement’, he says.

⁴ For more information see <https://www.headstrong.ie/>

St Patricks Mental Health Services

Chief executive of St Patrick's Hospital, Paul Gilligan, explains the hospital's interest in the Comhairle na nÓg initiative:

‘A number of strands attracted St Patrick's Mental Health Services to the Kilkenny project. In our strategy document, *Mental Health Matters 2013-2018, Empowering Recovery*, we focus on four categories of activity: service delivery, advocacy, research and education and developing service user participation. There are strong resonances in this project with our advocacy work and our public education role. We are also very keen to work with community groups. Furthermore, we have an adolescent unit and our Youth Empowerment Project has links with Comhairle na nÓg nationally. Then, in November 2014, I gave a keynote address at a Comhairle na nÓg national gathering in Croke Park. I was very struck at that event at the number of projects from around the country that had a mental health theme, maybe 30-40 per cent of all projects. So getting involved with the Kilkenny project seemed like a logical step. I especially liked that the initiative was driven by young people and was about community empowerment. I'd also seen how well the Green Flag project had worked in terms of environmental awareness so I saw the possibilities, provided of course the parameters are clear.

St Patrick's Mental Health Services already has an extensive schools programme. For example, we have developed a number of DVDs on mental health for teachers. We also give mental health talks in schools. We have a particular programme for Transition Year students who come to us on placement and then conduct awareness raising activities back in their school.

Personally, I think this focus on school is key; an educational environment is a very good place to influence young people's views on mental health. If we take the example of changed attitudes to the environment in recent years we can see the key role schools played. Children were learning about green issues in schools and then at home challenging their parents' behaviour. ‘Why are we not recycling that? What about saving energy there?’

Schools generally do a good job but I can see the pressure they are under: being asked to address this issue and that one, dealing with curriculum change, facing worsening pupil teacher ratios and so on. Mental health issues can get left behind, pushed to the side. The Kilkenny Flag project offers a creative response to this.

I know there is a debate about mental health as a cross curricular theme , you know, do it in English, Maths and so on. I know a module can be seen as isolated. I don't know what's best.

As I see it from our contact with TY students on placement in particular, each year there seems to be a greater awareness of mental health issues. Sometimes, they might mention that their parents revealed fear and apprehension when they hear their son or daughter is going on placement to a mental health facility. I think young people have healthier attitudes to difference and don't carry as much baggage

around mental health as adults. We see that with their engagement with the ‘*Walk in My Shoes*’⁵ project.

‘Schools are special places because they educate. They are hot points where attitudes on topics such as obesity, bullying, homophobia and so on can be addressed. It’s important to see schools as less prejudiced places than the harsher wider world outside. Of course, I know that young people bring in attitudes and prejudices from home and that’s a powerful influence but I believe schools can be very big positive influences in relation to mental health.

I like the shift in emphasis among guidance counsellors towards supporting young people deal with the normal everyday emotional ups and downs of life. Their intervention can be crucial in helping vulnerable young people avoid rushing towards medical help.

‘I’m not sure where this project might go. I think it has the potential to expand but might be driven by an organisation with a national remit. I see a huge number of great local responses to tragedies that occur in the community, for example, a suicide. These responses are healthy but sometimes lose the run of themselves. Often they need to link with other local initiatives and with national organisations that have expertise and experience. I think I would like schools to be more open, open to community initiatives like this project, open to new ideas, open to young peoples’ ideas, open to the community in the evening times, open to being more connected with the community.

A cross schools perspective

Paul Fields, Director of the Kilkenny Education Centre is well positioned to have an overview of school concerns. ‘In the past five years I have noticed school principals are much more aware of mental health issues. It’s often at the forefront of their conversations’, he says. ‘On balance I’d say primary schools are probably more responsive in that they can thread wellbeing themes across the curriculum. At second-level it tends to be seen as something that gets addressed in SPHE and maybe an occasional day or week dedicated to mental health. But I also see and hear a major problem for school in this area’, he continues.

‘It is as if they are swamped by mental health initiatives. There are a lot of very well intentioned individuals offering all sorts of things to schools but the quality is uneven. It’s like a big load of apples were tipped into the school grounds. You have to take a bite to see which ones taste good’, he explains.

‘The Health Promoting School Project’⁶ is one of the best initiatives I’ve come across. This encourages schools to see health, both physical and mental as a whole school issue. This encourages a

⁵ ‘*Walk in My Shoes*’ is a dedicated fundraising initiative, specifically aimed at supporting vulnerable young people established by St. Patrick’s Mental Health Services

developmental approach aimed at addressing specific gaps. It stops a piecemeal approach to mental health issues as it recognises what's already being done in a school. There are specific areas for schools to address such as diet, exercise, bullying and mental health. I'd love to see that extended further into second-level school', says Paul.

'As regards the idea of a 'flag' associated with a project, I also hear schools wondering whether there are too many flags. Healthy Schools, for example, have a banner. As I see it what seems to be needed is more co-ordination of all these initiatives and maybe some quality control. If a school has a negative experience with, say, a visiting speaker, it's understandable that they won't be rushing to invite in others', he concludes.

Section 5: Perspectives from the pilot project's facilitators

Erica⁷ works as a guidance counsellor Falcon College, one of the original schools selected for the pilot stage of the mental health flag project. 'When I heard about the project first I thought it was a good idea but would have liked more time to prepare for it', says Erica. 'Schools are busy places and you need lead in time to plan for new initiatives. I was also struggling with the cutback to guidance hours. I felt that we were probably doing a lot of the things that were recommended by the flag project already under our pastoral care programme. Now, more than six months later, we are running a mental health week in which we address a lot of issues – stress, anxiety, panic attacks, cyber-bullying, alcohol abuse and so on. Maybe we would have done that anyway; maybe we were prompted by the flag initiative', she continues.

'I think it is very important for schools to address mental health related issues and to do so with a positive emphasis. I think it is really important for students to be able to identify at least one face whom they can approach, someone who they feel will listen, will take their concerns seriously, not matter what they are. I see part of my role as a guidance counsellor as dealing with issues before they get to the stage of needing medical intervention. I like to focus on positive action, simple things like keeping yourself well, going for a walk, talking and that includes talking with friends. I've noticed over the years increased stress related to the Leaving certificate exams, more panic attacks, more insomnia. I like the way Bressi⁸ addresses these issues', remarks Erica.

She continues: 'There are some indicators that the abuse of alcohol and other drugs can be a response to situations. We are fortunate that we have a sexual health programme that runs for ten weeks in the school and is delivered by two health promotion officers from the Drum Youth Centre in Kilkenny. When I started as a guidance counsellor seven years ago, I was struck by how many students spoke about having thought about suicide. I quickly signed up for the ASIST programme,' explains Erica. ASIST (Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training) is a two-day interactive workshop in suicide first-aid offered through the National Office of Suicide Prevention within the HSE. According to the website (http://www.hse.ie/eng/services/list/4/Mental_Health_Services/NOSP/Training/) 'the ASIST programme is suitable for all kinds of caregivers - health workers, teachers, community workers, Gardai, youth workers, volunteers, people responding to family, friends and co-workers. ASIST trains participants to reduce the immediate risk of suicide and increase the support for a person at risk. It helps them seek a shared understanding of reasons for suicide and reasons for living'.

According to Erica, 'sometimes people outside the school system have very good ideas but they don't always 'get' how schools actually work. Because of this I think some projects don't take off as well as

⁷ Pseudonym

⁸ Niall Breslin author of *Me and My Mate Jeffrey* published by Hachette Books Ireland, 2015

they might. Timing is also an issue. It's quite difficult to introduce something in the middle of the school year, especially as I said when the cuts to guidance were having an impact in putting lots of things further into the margins', explains Erica. Vanessa⁹ is Leaving Certificate Applied co-ordinator in Jay School and was mental health flag project co-ordinator. She remarks:

'We were one of the pilot schools for the flag project. We are a DEIS school. The Student Council in Jay School looked at the whole scheme of the mental health flag, and I think their input is important. One of the things they were disappointed with was that initially other schools were not involved. By other schools, they meant the full range of schools in Co Kilkenny. They wondered why they were selected, being a DEIS school. And if you look at it, Curlew College and Falcon College are also DEIS schools. I suppose straightway they thought 'stigma, are we the only kids who have mental health issues?'' Is it because we are a disadvantaged school? Is it because we are poor? The scheme would have had more weight if, say, Merlin School, had been involved as well, or Owl College or Eagle School. So that was a huge difficulty at the beginning, 'Why us?'

Secondly, leading on from that, we would have liked more inter-schools participation. Say if we could have joined forces with Eagle School on a particular part of the achievement of the flag as an inter-schools link it would have been better. I remember a good few years ago when I was the home school liaison person I set up – it was in other counties too, particularly Dublin – I set up the *One Book One Kilkenny* project and I linked with a DEIS primary school in Kilkenny. It was just marvellous linking in with both schools, the way they were able to work together. There was a great energy and good co-operation. We had it involving The Secret of Kells. We had Cartoon Saloon¹⁰ involved and when we watched the movie it was really marvellous. I suppose it was getting together as a school community in Kilkenny, not just centring it on our particular school without a clue as to what anybody else is doing.

We have another difficulty in that we have another teacher in the school, a teacher of Religious Education, and she is getting involved in the Amber Flag. So there is all this talk about flags, flags, flags, and the kids are wondering which is which. They wonder what's the difference between achieving the Amber Flag and this flag? I think there are too many flags out there. I think some of the other flags/programmes are more established. The school is already involved in a number of activities this year for the amber flag so it's very similar. And to go back in and say we're doing something else for another flag can be confusing. I know there is also a Yellow Flag¹¹. I think there are too many flags. And essentially it's to achieve the same goal. So I think there is possibly a problem there. I know we have Green flag stuff, but that's completely different.

⁹ Pseudonym

¹⁰ The Irish animation company that made the film 'The Book of Kells'.

¹¹ The Yellow Flag Programme is a progressive equality & diversity initiative for primary and secondary schools which promotes and supports an environment for interculturalism.. See <http://www.yellowflag.ie/home>

‘If there was, as I suggested earlier, inter schools involvement, I’d like to see it leading on to a Gaisce like ceremony which could be held in the County Council Offices. All the schools would come together and it would be a recognition of everybody’s achievement, say with the bronze, the silver and whatever. This would emphasise a sense of achievement for kids. Maybe there should be one award as children are very sensitive to hierarchies. When it comes to mental health a small problem is not insignificant. That’s an issue, different levels.

I also think there needs to be a strong community link. Obviously we don’t just have mental health issues at school. We go home and have these issues and also in the community. From our point of view as a disadvantaged school we are aware that our children are not always going home to warm houses like other children might be. Now I’m not saying mental health issues are only connected to poverty but certainly poverty can make them worse so there needs to be more of a community dimension. Obviously here are children involved in this project who don’t have mental health issues but can benefit from their involvement. I’m thinking of things the kids can do outside the school in terms of raising awareness in the community and in terms of helping in the community. You know the way we have cross curricular in school, we also need to have joined up thinking between what goes on in school and what’s happening in the community. Who is to say that students from another school working alongside students from Jay School could not make a good contribution to the community?

‘I mentioned the *One Book, One Kilkenny* earlier as an example of how schools can work together. If this project is to continue there needs to be some sort of a booklet, something that’s hard copy to give to year groups so they can keep a check on achievements. It’s one thing for me as the co-ordinator to say, ‘well done guys, you have achieved’ but if they can see certain targets to aim for and to achieve, like I was saying to Angela previously, in the JCSP¹² when they have something in their hands where they can record their achievements, it works well. They can see as a class or as a year group that we have gotten so far.

In terms of mental health, I don’t think lists, boxes that have to be ticked, always make sense. Perhaps instead of a gold, silver, bronze award idea, it might be better to say we have achieved certain goals and we are going to be recognised for that at a ceremony at the end of the year. I’d prefer this than having distinctions like, or Jay School only got a bronze award.

Obviously, the idea of the heart of this project is a great idea but we don’t want a hierarchy straight away. There is no such thing as better schools and lesser schools, but there can be in people’s minds, and we should not do anything to feed that view.

Finally, as you ask about pressing mental health issues, I suppose what I see is the struggle single parent families have to bring up their kids. Drug and alcohol abuse at home is a huge issue. I see

¹² The Junior Certificate Schools Programme (JCSP) is particularly targeted at junior cycle students who are identified as being at risk of early school leaving, perhaps without completing the Junior Certificate. More details are available at www.ncca.ie

poverty as a big problem. All these feed into behavioural issues among the kids. We have a large cohort of kids who experience educational difficulties. Because of this many of them don't achieve their potential. Sometimes they come into school and these external burdens inhibit their learning. There is also stigma associated with certain addresses. When students come from a family where, say, the parents didn't get much formal schooling, it can be difficult to motivate the children. I'd say with something like cyber-bullying, this is less evident among my students than other issues. For a start they wouldn't all have smart phones or Facebook pages. Only a few have access to computers at home. Overall, for us the biggest challenge is trying to break the cycle with families where the parents didn't attend formal schooling. There can be attitudes that suggest kids from such families shouldn't dare to achieve. We would say of course they can achieve at school.

At the centre

Angela Champion, an independent consultant, was appointed project manager of the mental health school flag initiative by the Comhairle na nÓg Steering Committee in December 2014. Angela began work in January 2015. Her contract was for six months. 'You could say an intervention in the middle of the school year was not the best timing, Angela says, 'but I saw it as a very relevant and exciting project. I was also of the view that schools would respond positively'

'I like very much that this project originated from young people themselves. I think that the idea of the flag has been developed in a way that schools can achieve. There are challenges in sustaining the project and I think that needs to be worked on,' says Angela. She explains this further with two important points. 'Young people know that mental health is an important area for schools. Secondly, I think the project is realistic in both recognising one programme can't do everything and is trying to build on what is already happening within schools. Indeed, you could see it as supporting the good things schools are already doing in relation to promoting positive mental health.'

'One of the things that impresses me about the project is the peer support dimension. Whether the issues are to do with bullying, exam stress, loss and death, LGBT, peer support can make a big difference. The need is to have school as a safe environment for everyone, especially the more vulnerable young people. The goal is schools where all are accepted, where bullying is not acceptable, particularly if you are non-white, gay or from a Traveller background'. Angela stresses how the Mental Health Flag project is not only about the school and the teachers but hugely about the students. 'The Student Well-being Committee is a very central concept in the project,' she adds. 'The centrality of the well-being on each child is so important. A great strength of the project is that it enables young people's voices about their issues to be heard in the school community – by teachers, parents as well as by their peers'.

‘One of my concerns from the outset of the Mental Health Flag project was that it would not be something that was seen as a Transition Year only activity. I think TY is great but I have two concerns. Firstly, not everyone does Transition Year. Secondly, mental health issues don’t just surface at aged 15-16. They need attention at every year level, from first year to sixth year. By regarding it primarily as a TY project could marginalise it.

‘One of the issues that emerged during the project was the negative connotations associated with mental health. For example, one school wanted to know why they had been selected. They feared that school selection implied that mental health issues might be more prevalent in their school. They were afraid that it was a further negative message to the wider public when they already felt that the good work they do as a school is under-appreciated. Not unreasonably, the students there suggest that the project might involve more co-operation between all schools so as to avoid any stigma.

The idea of a local school co-ordinator is a good one. One person takes responsibility for driving the project, becomes the link person with Comhairle na nÓg, profiles activities in the school and, over time, is seen by students, teachers and parents as a champion for mental health. In practice within the school, this school co-ordinator develops a coherent overview of the complementary work being done by a wide range of people and groups – the students council, home school community liaison teachers, guidance counsellors, subject teachers, the parents association, extra-curricular projects and so on. He/she also harnesses the great energy young people have around mental health issues.

Making a difference

Christine¹³ co-ordinates the mental health pilot project in Curlew College and sees it as a continuation and development of work the school has been doing regarding mental health for a few years. ‘About four years ago we became involved in the Evolution project with the Ossory Youth Service. We found it an excellent initiative in that it provided 15 Transition Year students with five days leadership training. These 15 demonstrated great peer leadership within the school’, she explains. ‘Also, the local education committee that is part of the Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) project had taken a number of initiatives, for example in relation to cyber-bullying and mental health. Furthermore, we were becoming more conscious of students dealing with issues such as anxiety, stress and so on’, she says. Christine’s perspective is shared by Deirdre¹⁴ the guidance counsellor at Curlew College. ‘In the past five years in particular we have noticed more attention to young people’s mental health issues in the media. This is reflected in school. We have seen more talk about issues among students and parents. Students seem more willing to talk to teachers and to me as the guidance counsellor.

¹³ Pseudonym

¹⁴ Pseudonym

Obviously they talk to each other about issues and that adds to the overall awareness within the school', says Deirdre.

Christine adds that some Curlew College students were centrally involved in developing the Comhairle na nÓg mental health project, including criteria for awarding flags. 'Those students in particular showed great leadership within the school, says Christine. 'For example, I suppose we were already doing quite a number of things suggested in the mental health project. The framework helped us focus on doing the right things. The students were centrally involved. It was very much a partnership. Indeed, often they were proactive, making good suggestions, putting the pressure on us teachers to take action', she adds. 'Of course, there are reservations', she continues, 'especially about how much time can get eaten up, both for us and for the students'.

'I don't disagree that time is a big constraint', asserts Deirdre, 'but I think it's important to say that the mental health project, while demanding, can be done. You need someone in the school to run with it, to drive it, someone who believes in it. This presents its own challenges. Whenever anyone takes an initiative they can be setting themselves up for criticism. You have to learn to live with that. Being clear about the value of addressing mental health issues and seeing some positive results seem to be key', says Deirdre.

'No matter how good we are as teachers, we simply can't see or know about everything that is going on', continues Christine. 'We have noticed a change in the school environment as a result of the initiatives we have taken. Senior students come to us teachers more often and say they are concerned about this or that fellow student. It's driven by concern and is a very positive development. Sometimes it is anxiety, sometimes panic attacks. Yes, I notice when we address an issue, let's say like cyber-bullying, we hear more about it from the students. But I don't think that is putting ideas into their heads. The issues are there already. When the school addresses the issues, it helps students put language on their concerns', she believes.

'It's hard to get parents involved', continues Christine. 'We had a parent on the committee. I believe that parents have a role to play but time is a huge issue for them. They don't have that much free time to attend meetings. They will phone and be supportive. We do publish information in our newsletter. For example, prior to the training in sexual health as part of the Evolution project, all parents were telephoned in advance to make sure they knew what was involved and that they were comfortable with it. Marion¹⁵, the Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) colleague reports that most parents

¹⁵ Pseudonym

were delighted that it was happening. No parent objected. But it's not new in that they are hearing about the various projects and activities from their children', she says.

Christine continues the story. Yes, we probably should use parents more but I suppose it's not part of the tradition. Let's take cyberbullying. Many parents just don't understand what's going on. They don't always know about Facebook, Twitter or Snapchat. Often the students are teaching the parents how social media works. Indeed, sometimes they are teaching me. For example, they look at me very strangely when I say I don't have a Snapchat account. I'm not that much older than they are and already I am a bit behind.

Christine remarks that when they held sessions for parents on cyber-bullying, many parents said it was eye-opening. 'We also had a speaker come in to talk to all year groups and she frightened the life out of many', continues Christine. 'They thought they knew everything about social media and through her talks they discovered things they didn't know. She asked, for example, if they were happy to show pictures that they had posted and they were horrified at the thought of it, realising what could be revealed. She showed them how easy it is to access photographs that people might think were 'private'.

Christine is very clear about a need to 'get parents more involved so that there are more conversations at home – technology, mental health, sexuality, anxiety, exams', adding, 'and it's across all years 1st to 6th years'.

Deirdre believes strongly in the importance of supporting students settle in to school from the outset. 'I'm running a FRIENDS programme to reduce anxiety among first years', she explains. 'This is a very structured ten week course for all first years to teach coping skills. It's timetabled under SPHE and they have another SPHE class also. We explore basic concepts like: how do you recognise feelings?; what is confidence?; how do we relax?; how do we cope with difficulties when they occur? The students react well to it because they see it helping them cut down on anxiety. We drew up a contract of confidentiality about what happens in the room and they have been good about that. From a guidance and counselling point of view, it enables me to get to know them and for them to gain some understanding of what I do'. Deirdre adds that the FRIENDS programme complements the mentoring programme given to first year students by Transition Year students.

Christine says that the flag project has made the staff more aware of the signs of a mentally healthy school. 'I personally like it that we have a lot of different initiatives going on. There is a lot of learning by doing. I'm not sure if everyone appreciates that if you are to put on a dedicated mental health day or a week, it can involve at least two months' preparation'. She remarks that some of the

initiatives that have worked well in Curlew College have had 'fun elements to them'. 'For example,' she explains, 'when the mocks are on the Transition Year students give out lollipops to those doing the exams. It's an effective way of recognising how stressed they are. Also, last year the TYs put inspirational quotes on all their desks during the exams: 'You can do it'; 'Keep going'; that kind of thing, and posters around the school offering encouragement'. Particularly popular was a smile wall which Christine says was 'brilliant'. This popular activity involved filling a wall, in Christine's Home Economics classroom, with images of smiling students'. She remarks that 'I think these small practical actions influence the overall mood and atmosphere in the school, make it more positive, emphasising that school can be a happy place. I like the way the flag project is not that prescriptive. For example, I think 'run a friendship week' gives great scope'.

Deirdre also likes the emphasis in the flag project on small things. 'It is not so much us telling them, the students, what to do or not to do, it is them doing things, showing positive action. When we saw the criteria for the flag we realised we were doing a lot of these things already', she says. Christine adds that 'whenever wellbeing initiative are undertaken, there is a good ripple effect throughout the school,' she says. 'The word spreads and others begin to look at issues, to talk about them, to support each other'.

Section 6: Students' perspectives

Much of what Deirdre and Christine, respectively guidance counsellor and mental health flag co-ordinator, state about well-being issues in Curlew College is echoed in two student focus groups. The first group consisted of three first year students, three from second year and four TY students who are currently acting as mentors to first year students. The importance of supporting children to settle in to school emerged as a key concern. The mentoring and the FRIENDS programme, already mentioned by Deirdre, are seen as especially supportive. According to Helen' a first year student:

Even now while we sort of know where things are in the school, it's great to have the fourth years (as mentors) and to know we can go up to them and ask questions.

'Helen', 1st year, Curlew College

Imeldaⁱ, a second year student, recalled;

In the Friends programme in 1st year I remember we came into the gym and there was this paper body on the ground and we had to put feelings into it, like how would it feel if it was been bullied. We then talked about it and it was good.

Imelda, 2nd year, Curlew College.

The TY students indicate some of the value of the mentoring programme:

We had training as mentors and we learned games you can play with 1st years and this was really good as there were some people who didn't know anyone because they came from a different primary school and they were kinda forced to talk to people they didn't know. It was good.

'Fiona', TY student, Curlew College

Being a mentor brought me back to when I was a first year myself. I remember how scared I used be on the bus. It's easy to forget all that. So you want to make the first years comfortable.

'Grainne', TY student, Curlew College

When you get training as a mentor it does make you think a lot more about people's feelings. You also learn to look out for people on their own.

'Monica', TY student, Curlew College

The mentor training is recalled as effective and memorable for the chosen dozen. For example, The training brought the 12 of us together very much. We all became closer to each other.

'Naomi', TY student, Curlew College

Bullying is another core concern. Jane¹⁶ remembers:

We also talked about how the bully might feel and why he might be bullying.

‘Jane’, 2nd year Curlew College

Listening to the teachers and students talking about settling in to first year, it is clear that this is much more than a practical activity to smooth the transition, it is seen as communicating an important value at the heart of the school: each student is welcome and it is important to communicate this to the students. Similarly, the mentoring system not only assists first year students to settle in to school life, it enables Transition Year students to develop empathy and leadership skills. The mentoring system is underpinned by the training workshops provided by Ossory Youth Services. The TY students appear to have a good grasp of their role and its boundaries, aware of how they can support first year students through listening to their concerns and tuned it to recognise more severe and on-going issues that should be referred to teachers.

The second focus group in Curlew College consisted of an articulate group of fifth and sixth year students, each with a keen awareness of the value of school actions to support young people’s mental health. Some of the group had undergone training for the Evolution programme during Transition Year and spoke positively about its effects. As Michael remarked:

The Evolution programme was piloted by Ossory Youth in this school and in ‘Swan School’ in three key areas of life; drug and alcohol awareness, mental health and sexual health. Our job was to adapt it to our school. We did that.

‘Michael’, 6th year, Curlew College

This adaptation led to these students working with teachers, for example in devising an SPHE quiz for first year students. They were also involved in the smile wall, the inspirational quotes and the lollipop activities mentioned earlier by teachers Christine and Deirdre.

As Karen explains her involvement, it becomes clear that, as often happens with school initiatives, various influences converge and there can be overlaps. For example:

We went to the RDS as part of the ‘Cycle against Suicide’ and we saw that other schools had become ambassador schools. We became interested. You have to carry out five mental health activities in school. We did Friendship Week, Mental Health Week, Positive Notes on exam desks, Lollipops after the mocks, a Smile Wall. Myself and another girl wrote it up and we sent away and got Ambassador School status from ‘Cycle against Suicide’. The activities made people aware of a lot of things.

‘Karen’, 5th Year, Curlew College

¹⁶ pseudonym

Another student, Orla, talks about the usefulness of her membership of a local committee in developing her thinking about well-being issues.

It was really good on the committee to have parents' and teachers' opinions because you know when you have three students you're likely to share the same views. We got a broader view that way. You also see what parents don't know, for example about technology or even teachers, say, about bullying, how it goes on.

Orla, 5th Year, Curlew College

The students pick up this point in various ways. They acknowledge the very differing views of each group on various topics and how this can be challenging for them. However, experience suggests to them that structured student-parent-teacher dialogue is a fruitful way forward for schools interested in addressing mental health issues. Cyberbullying, to cite one example, is one topic where different groups tend to have very different information, experiences and viewpoints.

Michael, a 6th year student, is especially eloquent about how mental health promotion has to be central to any school's mission. He was a member of Comhairle na nÓg and was instrumental in encouraging Curlew College's involvement in the flag project. Michael says,

Perhaps because I was in the Comhairle na nÓg, I found that fellow students and teachers asked my opinion on a lot of things. The idea (of the flag) is that each year a school would take on a different theme and work towards that and then have it evaluated in some way. It should be student run but teacher supported. The pilot stage in a small number of schools was just to see how it might work.

Michael, 6th year, Curlew College

Orla adds that they would like to think, at this stage, that other schools would learn from what is happening in Curlew College to promote mental health, and follow their example. Michael continues: The stigma around mental health in Ireland is strong. You don't really discuss mental health matters. The students who attend Curlew College know now that it is OK to talk about these things. In school we are always told to be open about mental health, not to be afraid to talk about the issues.

Michael, 6th year, Curlew College

According to Orla,

Some people are very old-fashioned, they just think you should go to school, do your subjects, learn, come out. But you have a social life in school and you need to make sure you are OK in getting on with other people.

Orla, 5th Year, Curlew College

These senior cycle students expand on their discussions with teachers about SPHE. They indicate an awareness of how 'you can't talk to first year students the way you might to sixth years'. Patrick describes an activity that involves inviting students to put saliva on a toothbrush, put it in their mouths, then pass it on to the next person and ask them to do the same. 'They reacted quite negatively yet this is not that different from what happens at a disco, where someone might go round kissing ten people,' he says. The students also talk about how varied parents' reaction to these activities can be. Patrick remarks,

Parents' reactions were mixed. Some parents think it's a waste of time. What's wrong with a kiss? Others think it's every good as it helps protect them. There's always going to be two sides to everything. Even among ourselves as students there are different opinions as to how useful this is.

Patrick, 6th year, Curlew College

A number of his fellow students suggest that the activity might open doors to conversations between parents and their children.

As senior students in the school, they express protective concerns about their younger counterparts. There is strong agreement when Ryan remarks that 'they seem to be growing up younger and younger.' This generates further talk about age appropriateness and how easy or difficult it is to discuss topics that are personal and private. Orla remarks:

I hate when you hear adults saying, oh but they are too young (to discuss issues). As Ryan said, it's getting younger and younger. We can see this with our own eyes, like things that I did at fourteen or whatever.....

Orla 5th Year, Curlew College

Ryan is keen to pursue age appropriate behaviour. He says:

They watch porn which is all wrong. Real life is totally different. It's different from previous generations who might have been ignorant. The stage where people are looking at porn is getting younger and younger, so I think education should try to meet that. It's probably a big issue though, and the first years are not necessarily going to tell us what they are doing.

Ryan, 5th Year, Curlew College

Orla adds that 'you could be on Facebook and anything could pop up on your phone' while Michael believes that:

Pornography is a drug and anyone can get addicted to it. Exposure to it will obviously lead to a second, a third exposure and it can continue on. If the kids are educated on it, they might come to realise pornography is not real life. We have to find a way to combat that. You need a long term plan.

Michael, 6th year, Curlew College

Ryan cites the example of a reduction in smoking among young people. He says:
We learned in first year that smoking cigarettes could lead to stuff. We now know that less people smoke than ten years ago. It's down to education.

Ryan, 5th year, Curlew College

The conversation moves to alcohol, the acceptability of teenagers in public houses, the wider societal issues to do with alcohol and the role of education.

Michael brings the discussion back to the need as he sees it for schools to address well-being issues. He says:

Some schools see themselves as only academic. Here (in Curlew College) there is a triangle: academic work, social life and extra-curricular activities. These three should always be there in a school. Other schools should be able to do all of what we are doing because they have the staff and the staffs come from the same colleges, the same backgrounds. Maybe the other schools are more set in their ways. Here in Curlew College we'd notice that whenever you'd come in with a new idea, the teachers would be very open to ideas to do with mental health, willing to talk about it. It's open.

Michael, 6th year, Curlew College

Michael returns to the idea of a flag for mental health promotion:

The idea of the flag is that it would run, just like the Green schools, with five stages of mental health promotion that every school should tackle, cyberbullying, depression, eating disorders and so on. These should be covered by teachers and students working as one. We know it's a sensitive topic, mental health, but peer education is the best education. You are more willing to listen to someone a few years older than you.

Michael, 6th year, Curlew College

The 'flag' idea triggers a range of responses that indicate an appreciation of possibilities and limitations. For example, among the possibilities is the encouragement to a school community that they are addressing mental health issues. There are suggestions about a need to develop the criteria for the flag further. Some would like more on sexual health. While there is general support for the idea, there is also recognition that it would require 'a lot of effort from a lot of people', that 'it will depend very much on teachers' attitudes', 'and on teachers' training',

Section 7: Schools survey

As mentioned in Section 3, all 16 second-level schools in Co Kilkenny were contacted by a combination of phonecalls and e-mail messages. School principals were asked to respond to five questions. 14 of the sixteen schools engaged, to a varying extent, with the process. This is a very encouraging response rate and an indicator of how seriously schools regard the topic of young people's mental health. This section identifies the main points emerging from the short survey. Further details of the responses are available in Appendix 2.

Knowledge of Kilkenny Comhairle ne nÓg Mental Health School Flag project

As expected each of the three schools directly involved had a thorough knowledge and understanding of the project, its goals, framework and operation. In many of the other eleven schools that responded, knowledge was very limited. In one case the Amber Flag (a different project) was mentioned.

How schools see their current responses to mental health challenges

Twelve schools responded as follows.

Very well	Satisfactory	We could do better	We could do a lot better.
6	4	2	0

One school rated itself between 'Very well' and 'Satisfactory' while another put itself between 'Satisfactory' and 'We could do better'.

Additional comments reveal high levels of awareness and sensitivity regarding mental health issues in schools. One principal remarked 'The mental health issues experienced by pupils change on a daily basis and it can be impossible to keep up'. Another stated: 'I feel we are doing a satisfactory job as I wonder can you ever say we are doing very well'.

Programmes, subjects, strategies and other initiatives which schools regard as effective in addressing mental health issues

What is especially striking about the responses to the third question is the variety and extent of activities mentioned (see Appendix 2). The responses can be interpreted as reflecting a 'whole school' approach, especially if and when curricular activities, pastoral structures, engagement with agencies outside the school and extra-curricular projects are co-ordinated. Examples of curricular activities include the SPHE (Social, Personal and Health Education) programme. Pastoral structures include the use of guidance counsellors and year-heads. Examples of engagement with other services include the Evolution programme from the Ossory Youth Service. An example of extra-curricular activities cited by respondents was 'Cycle against Suicide'.

The responses also point to the uniqueness of each school and the possibilities of different and creative ways of engaging with mental health issues. Importantly, it suggests a recognition within schools that the complexity of mental health issues requires responses at multiple levels and can be seen as a rejection of ‘gimmicks’ and ‘quick fixes’. Those who engaged in interviews, face-to-face and on the telephone, were strong on the layered nature of comprehensive approaches.

It is also worth noting that awareness and specific training for teaching staff is mentioned in at least one case.

Advantages of a mental health flag for schools

The possibility of such a flag providing schools with ‘a focus’, ‘a talking point’, ‘a symbol’, making a statement that the school regards mental health issues seriously, were mentioned. In some of the phone interviews it was clear that while there is enthusiasm for a Comhairle na nÓg project, not everyone was convinced that a ‘flag’ was the most appropriate. As one principal remarked, ‘Any initiative that promotes positive mental health would be a huge advantage to all school communities’.

Disadvantages of a mental health flag for schools

The comment ‘A bit gimmicky – the challenge is to be consistent’, captures a concern felt in some schools. ‘Being consistent’ seems to imply a long term strategy involving daily formal and informal interaction between teachers and young people. At times it appears that there may be a feeling that the good work being done in schools is often underappreciated. Reservations were also expressed about the language used around mental health and, in particular, self-harm and suicide. Further reservations touched on a fear of increasing teachers’ workloads. Some questioned the idea of a ‘flag’, wondering if it is an overused symbol, a tied one, even a slightly arrogant one. Critics were keen to distinguish between their hesitancy about flags and their enthusiasm for a mental health initiative from Comhairle na nÓg. ‘If you could come up with a new symbol it would be great’, remarked one principal.

Section 8: Key Findings

1. The value of the pilot stage

The evidence from Jay School, Falcon College and, in particular, Curlew College point to the effectiveness of a framework, such as that proposed by the mental health school flag project, in supporting schools to address wellbeing issues. It's also very evident from the survey that schools are already engaged in an impressive range of activities that can be grouped under a 'wellbeing' or 'mental health' umbrella. The pilot phase suggests that a structure such as the framework gives an additional impetus and focus.

The Comhairle na nÓg Steering Committee members selected the three schools with a view to a geographical spread throughout County Kilkenny as well as aiming at schools which had, up to then, limited engagement with Comhairle na nÓg. Coincidentally, each of the schools is part of the DEIS programme¹⁷. However, in a reminder of the sensitivities associated with labels such as 'disadvantage', the students in at least one school were suspicious that neighbouring schools were not participating in the pilot stage. They wondered was there an implicit association between mental health issues and 'disadvantage'.

A six-month period for the pilot stage was seen by some as too short. The observation that a dedicated 'mental health' day or week could take two months planning is relevant. Starting in January, when the school year was already under way, had a limiting effect. Despite these limitations, great credit is due to those who took part, particularly the overall project co-ordinator and the individual co-ordinators in the three schools. Had the pilot phase run for a full school year, ideally with a few months' lead-in time, presumably further strengths and weaknesses would have been revealed.

2. The relationship between schools and outside agencies

It is clear from the survey of Kilkenny schools (Appendix 2) that many schools see themselves as already addressing mental health issues quite adequately. They point to SPHE (Social, Personal and Health Education) and other school programmes as well as a wide variety of initiatives. Not only that, but some express reservations about 'outsiders' coming in to school environments. They indicate a wariness about what some call 'well-intentioned' individuals and organisations. Sometimes the reservations are rooted in poor previous experiences of invited guest speakers. The suggestion from former Comhairle member Brian about young people 'vetting' guest speakers indicates further

¹⁷ Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) the Action Plan for Educational Inclusion, was launched in May 2005 and remains the Department of Education and Skills policy instrument to address educational disadvantage. The action plan focuses on addressing and prioritising the educational needs of children and young people from disadvantaged communities, from pre-school through second-level education (3 to 18 years). (www.education.ie)

validity for these reservations. In some cases there seems to be a perception, whether valid or not, that outside agencies regard schools as failing in their promotion of mental health. Understandably, schools resent such implications. Furthermore, outside agencies don't always appreciate how rigidly structured the school days, indeed, the full school year, can be. Disruption of established routines is not always welcome. Indeed, because Transition Year is the most flexible year in the six-year cycle, a danger is that too many initiatives get squeezed into TY and not enough are aimed at the other five years. Project manager Angela Champion is especially clear about how wellbeing issues are far too important to be confined to any single year group.

An important message from the evaluation for the Comhairle na nÓg project is that further development of this project will require close liaison with schools to ensure outside interventions complement existing school-based provision.

At the same time, a very striking reality to emerge from the evaluation is the extensive range of possible support services within Co Kilkenny which could enhance the school experience. The evidence from the students in Curlew College about the value of youth work services underlines this. The nature of schooling can lean towards schools becoming, as it were 'self-contained bubbles'. Mental health is an obvious area where harnessing local and national expertise can be appropriate and effective. The African proverb 'It takes a village to raise a child' is a reminder to schools that working in collaboration with other professional and voluntary community groups, when done well, can enrich young people's learning.

3. The sensitive nature of the topic and the associated language

Despite its positive literal meaning, for some, 'mental health' can carry negative connotations. Some informants noted that 'mental health initiatives' are often suggested as responses to incidents and patterns of self-harm and suicide. A number, including some school principals, indicated a preference for the language of 'wellbeing' rather than of 'mental health'. Parental concerns were mentioned on a few occasions, for example, in relation to what were interpreted as 'suicide prevention' initiatives. Comments from parents like 'I'm not comfortable that my son is listening to all this talk about suicide' were reported by more than one principal. Anecdotal evidence from other parts of the country suggests that student deaths by suicide can be very traumatic for a school community. Thus, 'mental health issues' are sometimes seen as 'raw' and 'especially sensitive'. Different schools respond to such challenges in different ways¹⁸. Some have found the structured support outlined in *Well-being in Post-Primary Schools, Guidelines for Mental Health Promotion and Suicide Prevention*,

¹⁸ One example of how young people responded creatively to what they perceived as overly negative language associated with 'mental health' is the story of the CAST Film Festival. An account can be found in Chapter 9 'Making films to promote mental health and wellbeing' in Jeffers (2015).

(DES/HSE/DoH Ireland, 2013) and *Responding to Critical Incidents, Guidelines for Schools* (DES, 2015) helpful. The Comhairle project framework might be revised in the light of the above remarks.

4. Is a flag the most appropriate way of supporting schools to address well-being issues?

There are mixed views about the key idea in the project of a ‘flag’. Some are uncomfortable about what they perceive as ‘flag-waving’ about such a sensitive topic. ‘If, God forbid, you get a flag one week and then the following week you had a serious critical incident in the school, I wonder how people might react’, reflected one principal. Many take the analogy with the Green Flag but point out that ‘wellbeing’ and ‘environmental action’ are very different concepts. Some fear schools will be overrun with flags. The proposed gradations – bronze, silver, gold and platinum – make some people uncomfortable because of the implied hierarchy and a danger of appearing to pitch one school against another. Others would prefer more focus on intentionality – a school’s willingness to address the issues, rather than on perceived ‘achievements’. The phrase ‘I fear it could be reduced to a tick-box exercise was mentioned more than once. Whether one agrees with these reservations or not, they do draw attention to the need in any educational innovation to consider possible unintended consequences.

That said, there is strong support in schools for the essence of the Comhairle na nÓg proposal: a framework to encourage schools to engage with wellbeing issues. Further consultations with schools might tease out the precise focus of the award, if ‘award’ is what is intended. Some suggestions include:

- Use the Fair Trade model rather than the Green schools ones.

- Consider something similar to the WorldWise Global School ‘passport’ for development education

- Have a plaque or certificate of participation rather than a flag

- Have an annual event, preferably in County Hall, where schools might present, possibly in a short (3 minutes?) film, how they are promoting wellbeing. This could co-incide with a fair where community groups might display their work.

5. Collaboration between schools

This project, as originally conceived, saw schools in ‘stand-alone’ terms. It would appear that some sharing of experiences/activities/viewpoints among both teachers and students between two or more schools could be very enriching for all concerned and help further ‘normalise’ discourse related to mental health issues. Indeed, in developing the project further some inter-school co-operation might be an essential part of the enterprise.

6. Primary school possibilities

An original intention was to pilot the flag programme in primary schools as well as in second-level ones. For a range of reasons, this didn't happen. Thus, it is important to assert that during the evaluation, no good reason emerged as to why primary schools should not be encouraged to apply a framework to promote wellbeing, especially among children in fifth and sixth classes. The draft guidelines might be refined in consultation with teachers, students and parents.

7. The role of Comhairle na nÓg in supporting well-being in schools

One of the reasons for including an extensive range of young people's voices from Curlew College is to illustrate for interested adults how informed and engaged these students are about well-being. They also indicate how the challenges young people face continue to change. Their concerns, for example, about mental health, drug and alcohol use, sexual behaviour, technology including social media and pornography and the inter-relationships between all of these, point to the value of consultative fora like Comhairle na nÓg dealing with wellbeing issues. This project illustrates the value of links between schools and Comhairle na nÓg. Without prescribing an agenda for future Comhairlí, on-going engagement with issues such as education for democratic citizenship, well-being and health promotion and infrastructural development appears relevant and appropriate.

8. Support from government departments and others

The Kilkenny Comhairle na nÓg project offers a model of how an award focused framework can advance positive mental health in schools. However, due to the limited resources of any Comhairle na nÓg, sustaining such a project requires additional funding and organisational expertise. A government department (e.g. Children and Youth Affairs, Education and Skills, Health) - or a combination of departments and, possibly, other groups - should consider building on the pilot project and on this evaluation to advance an award related framework for positive mental health in schools at regional and national levels.

9. Well-being within schools

The digest of school responses to five questions on mental health promotion (Appendix 2) offers a valuable set of pointers as to how schools see themselves addressing wellbeing. Some inter-school learning may result from the digest. The digest also challenges schools to look at their current policies and practices. The three-layered perspective of support for all, support for some and support for a few (DES/HSE/DoH, 2013) can scaffold such an interrogation.

A first strand of analysis might relate to obligatory curriculum provision, in particular the quality of

SPHE programme ¹⁹ but also the atmosphere and general climate of everyday classrooms. A second, might be to do with other school supports for all, including pastoral care structures, tutors, year heads and as well as the role of specialists such as guidance counsellors, home school liaison personnel, chaplains, learning support teachers and others. A third strand of analysis might look at the wellbeing related skills of the school staff and the ongoing development of these skills. A fourth strand might identify how once-off events – such as visiting speakers – as well as extra-curricular activities support student and staff wellbeing. A fifth might look further beyond the school, asking how best the school can harness the goodwill and expertise of statutory and voluntary agencies, locally and nationally. A sixth strand might analyse the quality of caring relationships across the school: between students and teachers, among students themselves, among teachers, with support staff, between teachers and parents, between school leaders and the rest the school community. A seventh line of enquiry and analysis might be to map how well students' voices are heard, formally and informally. The DES/HSE/DoH (2013) guidelines of well-being are especially useful in assisting school frame a fresh approach.

¹⁹ One indication of the challenges facing SPHE is illustrated by the status of the subject at senior cycle. The NCCA has published a Curriculum Framework built around five areas of learning: Mental Health, Gender studies, Substance abuse, Relationships and sexuality education and Physical activity and nutrition. Imaginative and appropriate assessment and evaluation procedures are also outlined. However, this is optional for schools to implement. There is limited evidence that SPHE is actually timetabled on a regular basis at senior cycle.

Section 9: Possible Further Steps

Developing the Kilkenny Comhairle na nÓg project could follow many possible pathways. Much depends on the commitment, resources and capacity of a sponsoring agency – such as a government department – which could build on the pilot project and this evaluation to advance an award focused project on positive mental health in schools at regional and national level. In addition, some other specific steps might be considered as set out below:

Kilkenny Comhairle na nÓg should continue to be open to supporting schools to address mental health issues and to integrate mental health awareness into their daily practices.

Schools might consider this report to evaluate – in association with students and parents – how adequate their current policies and practices regarding wellbeing and mental health are as responses to the challenges faced by young people.

Schools should familiarise themselves with Circular Letter 0023/2010 ‘Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) and Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) Best Practice Guidelines for Post-Primary Schools’ and follow its suggestions.

Individuals and organisations visiting schools to engage with mental health issues should see the process as a collaborative one, informing themselves in advance of current practices and initiatives operating in the particular school, including Circular Letter 0023/2010.

Individuals and organisations visiting schools to engage with mental health issues should demonstrate sensitivity in the general language and precise terminology they use when talking with students.

Further development of this Programme, should consider ways in which inter-school collaboration might be enabled.

Interested stakeholders should consider suggestions for an appropriate award to schools promoting positive mental health which might not be a flag.

Building on the pilot project and on this evaluation, a new and more age appropriate Framework for implementation in Primary Schools should be developed, initially in co-operation with a small number of schools and preferably with the support of a national agency.

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Appendix 1: Comhairle na nÓg Mental Health Flag Guidelines for Schools, Selected extracts

About the flag

This initiative is the ‘brainchild’ of a collective of young people that were the Kilkenny Comhairle na nÓg 2012. It has since been developed by a collaborative process of engagement led by subsequent Comhairlí with young people, mental health professionals, Kilkenny Comhairle na nÓg Steering Committee and Lifeline Mental Health Youth Sub-Group over the course of 2013 and 2014.

This is a pilot initiative targeting two primary and two post-primary schools to deliver and evaluate the programme during the academic year 2014/2015. The pilot is viewed as a ‘trial and error’ process to ultimately support the development of a programme that is suitable for schools at local and hopefully national level.

Mental Health Flag Programme is a framework for schools to ensure that mental health and mental health awareness is an integral part of the school environment.

What we’re aiming for

- 1 To ensure that the subject of mental health is integrated within the school system.
- 2 Young people will demonstrate better coping skills and an increased knowledge in dealing with life challenges that will affect their mental health during their adolescence and beyond.
- 3 Young people’s participation on the Mental Health School’s Flag will reflect the energy, fun, emotions and pace of young people’s lives.
- 4 The Mental Health School’s Flag will be dynamic, evolving and always adapting to meet the needs of young people concerning their mental health.

No one goes through life without some mental health problems. We want young people to have better coping skills in dealing with issues affecting their mental health. As school is where they spend a significant amount of their young lives, it’s only fitting that school is an environment where young people feel supported and safe. We think this can’t be ‘spoofed’ – it need to be a whole school approach. Only through real, innovative, fun and genuine efforts by the school to involve young people in talking about their mental health will this be achieved. We need to reach the point where all young people feel that it’s ok not to be ok.

Idea & Raising Awareness

The idea can begin anywhere. It’s crucial however to give the idea time to grow, to gather momentum and discover possible ‘mental health champions’ within the school community. The Mental Health

School Flag is a *whole school initiative* and as such all members of the school community should be made aware that the idea for a mental health flag for the school exists. This might be achieved in the following way:

- ☐ The Mental Health School Flag idea is put on the agenda for Staff / Board of Management / Student Council / General Pupil Assembly / Parents' Association meetings.
- ☐ Create a noticeboard
- ☐ Put up the idea on the school website
- ☐ Send a note home to parents or include on the school newsletter

Forming a Mental Health School Flag Committee

The school should appoint a Mental Health School Flag *Coordinator* to lead the process.

The next step should be to establish a mental health school flag committee. It's important that, as much as possible, all parts of the school community is represented. A suggested composition for the committee is:

1. Coordinator Teacher
2. Vice Co-ordinator Teacher
3. 1st Year nominee Pupil
4. 2nd Year nominee Pupil
5. 3rd Year nominee Pupil
6. 4th Year nominee Pupil
7. 5th Year nominee Pupil
8. 6th year nominee Pupil
9. Parent nominee Parent
10. Board nominee School Board of Management member
11. Co-opt nominee Co-opt option
12. Co-opt nominee Co-opt option

Criteria for GOLD award

Does the school have an appointed MHSF Coordinator?

Does the school have a MHSF Committee representing the *whole school* community?

Did the MHSF Committee receive training in relation to mental health?

Does the school make a reasonable effort to raise awareness of mental health to the whole school

community on a continuous basis?

Do pupils have clear, private and accessible sources of information regarding supports for mental health issues relating to bullying, sexual orientation, separation, family issues or other?

Do pupils have and know they have access to a non-teaching adult to talk about an issue whilst protecting their anonymity from their peers?

Does the school have a buddy system in place for 1st Years?

Does the school host events for Mental Health Week that encourages quieter / shy / marginalised pupils to positively participate in the school community, be more aware of issues, etc?

Has the school delivered mental health tuition as set out in SPHE?

Has each year been able to avail of a retreat outside of the school premises?

Has the school provided additional supports for students to cope with exam pressure?

Has the school delivered workshops to Transition Year students relating to mental health using outside agencies such as GROW, Kilkenny Lifeline, Foroige, The Samaritans, AWARE, Ossory Youth etc?

Has the school a clear anti-bullying policy and evidence to show that the policy is being thoroughly implemented?

Has the school raised awareness on behalf and in support of the LGBT student population and the issues affecting them in coming / not coming out?

Can the school evidence a wide and varied curriculum of non-academic activities that encourages niche participation and diversity of pupils?

Has the school organised mental health workshops for parents?

Has the school a dedicated 'quiet' chillax room for pupils to sit, read, listen to music and recreate?

Does the school diary display information on accessible, free and confidential services for young people with mental health issues?

Appendix 2 Responses to Survey of schools

All 16 second-level schools in Co Kilkenny were contacted by a combination of phone-calls and e-mail messages. 14 of the sixteen schools engaged, to a varying extent, with the process. This is a very encouraging response rate particularly given how busy schools are. This appendix presents a digest of the responses.

The five questions were:

1. What do you already know about the Kilkenny Comhairle na nÓg Mental Health School Flag project?
2. In your opinion, how well do you think your particular school is addressing mental health challenges currently (select one): A. Very well. B. Satisfactory. C. We could do better. D. We could do a lot better.
3. What programmes, subjects, strategies or other initiatives are, in the experience of your school community, particularly effective in addressing mental health issues?
4. What might be the advantages of a mental health flag for schools?
5. Do you see any disadvantages/problems with a mental health flag for schools?

The following schools were contacted. 14 replied in full or in part, some briefly, some in great detail. An amalgam of responses follows. The co-operation of these schools is much appreciated.

Blackbird School
Curlew College
Eagle School
Falcon College
Goldfinch College
Siskin School
Wren School
Swan School
Jay School
Kestrel College
Lapwing School
Merlin School
Robin College
Owl College
Tern College
Kingfisher School

1 What do you already know about the Kilkenny Comhairle na nÓg Mental Health School Flag project?

Very little

Heard mention of the project through Ossory Youth but I don't know the details

Very little

Very little

We are aware of the Amber Flag initiative, but not so much of the Comhairle na nÓg initiative "Let's Go Mental".

This year we are striving to achieve the Amber Flag, but would be interested in learning more about the Comhairle project.

We are quite familiar with the project as we have implemented it in our school

I have heard about it and read a little but beyond that I do not have much information.

It is a pilot initiative being run in certain schools. Bronze, Silver and Gold flags can be achieved on the basis of fulfilling certain criteria

We are aware that they had proposed a project but are not aware of the projects undertaken or the progress made with same.

Yes, we heard about the project and were interested but getting our 3rd Green Flag was a priority last year.

It is Mental Health Flag programme being piloted in two Kilkenny schools.

2. In your opinion, how well do you think your particular school is addressing mental health challenges currently (select one): A. Very well. B. Satisfactory. C. We could do better. D. We could do a lot better.

Very well	Satisfactory	We could do better	We could do a lot better.
6	4	2	

One school rated itself between Very well and Satisfactory, another between Satisfactory and We could do better.

Additional comments

We could do better, there is always room for improvement.

Currently I would say satisfactory, but also, we could do better.

I feel we are doing a satisfactory job as I wonder can you ever say we are doing very well. The mental health issues experienced by pupils change on a daily basis and it can be impossible to keep up.

I would hope that we are providing some relevant information and awareness around the challenges but I suppose the school could always do better! So somewhere between B and C

I believe that we are addressing mental challenges very well however this is not a fixed state and as mental health is an evolving and changing aspect of each person's overall well-being the response by the school needs to evolve and change.

Between very well and satisfactory

Q.3 What programmes, subjects, strategies or other initiatives are, in the experience of your school community, particularly effective in addressing mental health issues?

A multi-disciplinary approach, educational and pastoral. We have also been involved in the 'cycle against suicide' and have achieved their Amber Flag for our work in promoting an awareness of the issue. We have also launched the HSE's Health Promoting Schools initiative which includes a focus on mental health.

SPHE, Religion, CSPE, Pastoral Care Team, Evolution Programme, Year head programme

SPHE, Religious Education

Guidance counsellor and school chaplain, school retreats

The general approach is a positive and caring one but could be more core driven – general promotion and awareness drives. Externally driven workshops are effective and more relevant to students along with SPHE, RSE, RE and themed projects/readings

SPHE, RE, Friends programme- Evolution, Mentoring of 1st years by TY, Cycle against Suicide.

Ambassador School status, Friendship week.

We have various retreats, Energize week which focuses on mental health, three counsellors working closely with the students, a new anti-bullying initiative has been set up within the school to combat bullying. We have guest speakers in to speak to the students as to how to deal with pressure of exams and life in general. Last week two counsellors had an information stand outside the staff room to speak to students about mental well-being and the possibility of providing one on ones. This year we had mindfulness talks with our Junior and Leaving Certificate (students).

Not so sure about the effectiveness of any of the initiatives. Our school is a small community where every student is known by name to everyone else. This is a good starting point. There is hopefully a message of encouragement around seeking help when needed or to seek support for a friend who needs it,

Cairdeas – this is a mentoring programme for incoming first years to make the transition to 2nd level successful and less stressful.

SPHE – through this subject issues around all aspects of well-being are addressed

Mental Health Week –A variety of guest speakers address each year group on various aspects of mental and well-being

Cycle Against Suicide – attending student leaders congress in January each year promotes positive mental health and an awareness of the fragility of same. It also promotes the realisation that its ok not to feel ok and its ok to ask for help.

Active week – Promotion of the importance of healthy body – healthy mind

One good adult – The Principal, Guidance Counsellor, SPHE Co-ordinator and a member of the RE team completed training with MHAI and this initiative was presented to all staff in the context of raising awareness of the whole school response to positive mental health.

CPD – Staff have completed in-service on Mood Watchers and Positive Psychology

One-One support and counselling – The guidance counsellor provides one-to-one-support and intervention to students with different levels of need and where appropriate or deemed necessary refers students to outside agencies (with parental consent).

Students are also supported through one-to-one counselling with a counsellor employed by the school for a number of hours each week.

All Transition Year students do a ten-week module (2 classes per week) based on our adaptation of the ‘Mental Health Matters’ programme. We are running a wellness week in January. We are developing a ‘branching out’ mural where leaves are in the shape of hands and on each hand is written the details of where to get support on mental health issues. We fundraised for the Donal Walsh Foundation last year. We teach SPHE. We have an external counsellor who comes to the school every Wednesday.

A very successful Positive Mental Health/Anti-Bullying week was held from November 17th in 2014/2015 and is being held again this year 2015/2016

Claddagh Programme – Games afternoon/Halloween and Christmas Party which helps new first year students to settle into their new school environment as well as allowing them to build up a new support network of friends. It is also very valuable in highlighting to our student cohort that whilst we at <school name> strive towards academic achievement for all our students we also place a huge emphasis on the development of the whole person and realise the importance of allowing our students time to build on their social and communication skills.

AWARE talks for 5th and 6th Year Students 09/10TH December 2014 and are taking place this academic year also on Thursday and Friday the 11th and 12th of November. These workshops are seen as a key element of the school experience for our senior students and there is a large emphasis on the development of coping strategies and encouraging students to open up about their feelings.

1st Year Retreat to allow the first years time to strengthen the bonds they have made with their peers on their entrance to <school name> as well as allowing them time for reflection and mindfulness.

There is an effective referral system within the school through which support for students is provided by class tutors, year heads, chaplain and the guidance counsellor.

Year Heads reiterating the importance of respect, inclusion and a positive school environment through Year Assemblies. The year heads meet with their year group formally at least once a term and many times each term. The year head is an integral part of our pastoral care team and students are aware that they can approach their year head at any time if any issues arise for them. In many cases the year head has observed a change in a student’s mood and offers them support before the students speaks to

them. Promotion of safe use of technology in computer lessons –The Community Guard <name> is scheduled to do talk on Cyber Bullying to all year groups in December as this is a major issue for our young people and can be a significant source of conflict and distress for students . The school has also nominated one student as a Internet Safety Ambassador and it is hoped that thorough the training they will receive that a student task group can be set up to which she can impart her knowledge so we might disseminate it to the entire student cohort and the school community as a whole.

Our pastoral care system in <school name> fosters a sense of fair play, justice and respect for all. It seeks to provide an environment where problems and difficulties are challenged and resolved as quickly as possible with an emphasis on counselling and support;

Staff vigilance in relation to bullying during and outside of class any concerns are reported to Year Head

Subject areas such as SPHE, CSPE and Lifeskills dealing with issue of anti-bullying and positive mental health

The six key skills promote the development of the whole person and facilitates the students in becoming a reflective person who is aware of the importance of managing self and being active. We at <school name> believe that the implementation of key skills allows students to develop coping mechanisms for a range of situations to allow them to become responsible and active citizens of the future.

Provide effective supports for students – selection of a significant adult if necessary.

There are excellent lines of communication between <school name> and outside agncies such as NEPS, NCSE, HSE and CAHMS through which we as a school can gain advice and direction to best provide for our students who may be facing challenging times as well as strategies we can implement to to prevent these issues arising.

Supervision of students before and after school and during breaktimes is an ongoing practice.

Students taking on leadership roles within the school senior/class prefect and student council representatives who can promote the needs of the student and work in co-operation with school management and staff to ensure that a welcoming and safe environment exists for all in the school community.

Review of staff education, training and provision of support services as needed - Staff member now trained in the Friends programme

A large number of students participated in a running club last year in order to promote the link between being active and Positive mental health. These students along with a number of staff members then took part in the ‘Darkness into Light’ run in Kilkenny City.

A local addiction counsellor gave a talk to the Parents Association on Wednesday the 24th of October on the issues facing young people today.

In 2014/2015 a group of first year students under the direction of their CSPE teacher <name> undertook an Anti-Bullying Campaign promoting the Shield my School Campaign.

All TY students will take part in a 4 hour workshop broken over two days on the development of coping strategies during challenging times.

Finbarr Walsh father of Donal Walsh will give a talk to all students in November.

Niall Tuohy Irish Athlete will give a talk to 1st, 2nd and 4th year students on the importance of nutrition to a health body and a healthy mind.

SPHE

Personal Development

Guidance and counselling

RE

Squashy Couch Pilot Scheme

Mental Health Awareness Week

Beat the Bullying Blues Week

Guest speakers e.g. Elma Walsh, Live Life and Marc Mulligan, Outside the Comfort Zone and many, many more.

Friends for Life Programme

Retracking Programme

Working Things Out Programme

What makes you smile initiative

Anchor school for Cycle Against Suicide and student leaders congress

Poster campaigns etc...

These are but a few of the activities the school engages in to promote positive mental health and wellbeing.

Q. 4. What might be the advantages of a mental health flag for schools?

It may give schools a focus in terms of dealing with the issue.

It would act as a whole school symbol, that this is important to us as a community

Creates awareness. Talking point. Seek to improve to reach the next level flag. It keeps mental help active!

Creation of a recognised 'safe zone/place' for young people to be a part of or a recognition of a community who are willing to listen and talk about/deal with Mental Health issues.

Raise awareness within the school community. Change the attitude to mental health. Give people confidence to seek help and give information on where to go for help.

I wonder about this, to be honest I would have reservations. This is a very private matter for students and that is the way they wish to deal with. I don't believe that we should be advertising this. Some parents have told us that there is often too much of an emphasis on mental well-being and anti-bullying initiatives and students can become overawed by it. The belief is that some students feel it is "cool" to have mental health issues. This may distract from the genuine cases.

A mental health flag might validate the work being done. It might give students an awareness of the need to appreciate our mental health and a realisation that some people can have difficulties that need to be supported. It might encourage further initiative on mental health

Excellent idea, a visual reminder of the importance of mental health

Any initiative that promotes positive mental health would be a huge advantage to all school communities. Our young people today are under severe pressure from academic and social aspects and due to the influence of Social Media many of our young people are not equipped with the skills to communicate to others how they are feeling. A mental health flag will be a symbol to our young people that the school promotes a positives environment where every pupil is cherished and valued and will be listened to and supported. The mental health flag will act as a symbol to students that ‘its ok to not be ok’ and that they always have someone who will listen to them and support them within the school community.

We want our students to take action and get involved in activities to combat the stress and mental strain that people experience. Our aim is to increase the resilience of our students while also encouraging them to adopt the message of Cycle Against Suicide "it's ok not to feel ok, and it's absolutely ok to ask for help".

We are currently working towards achieving the Amber Flag for the School through Suicide Aware in partnership with the Union of Students in Ireland and The Institute of Guidance Counsellors.

We are also the anchor school in Waterford for Cycle Against Suicide 2016

Q. 5. Do you see any disadvantages/problems with a mental health flag for schools?

There are now a lot of flags! Green Schools, Active Schools, Inclusive Schools, Amber Flag (mental health), Health Promoting Schools

A bit gimmicky – the challenge is to be consistent. Good work is being done in schools. There is a difficulty about the language around mental health and suicide. ‘Wellbeing’ is much less threatening. Parents not always comfortable with some issues being presented. Well intentioned people from outside the school are not enough; there must be consistent high quality.

With the raised awareness of Mental Health and a general recognition of the various forms of same, I think that recognising a community’s willingness to broach the matters is important and beneficial.

None!

Challenge of increasing teachers’ workload. Teachers already stretched in relation to time

Yes, there could be disadvantages. Nobody has a monopoly on mental health – the flag can look great but what about the students that don’t feel that but haven’t told anyone yet – does the flag prevent them coming forward as they think they are now an issue!!! The opposite could also be the case. If there is to be a flag the criteria for it must be measurable – it should be for striving to promote positive mental health – not for having arrived!!

No.

A disadvantage might be that the topic of mental health may be seen as the sole responsibility of the school whereas for any initiative to be successful it must be taken on board in the home as well as in the community at large.

I applaud your initiative but it is very similar to the Amber Flag for schools which a large number of schools are participating in.

I am attaching the link for the Amber Flag initiative for your perusal.

<http://www.suicideaware.ie/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/Amber-Flag-Booklet-14.doc>
