

Review of Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE)

At the request of the Minister for Education and Skills, a major review of RSE in primary and post-primary schools was undertaken from June 2018 to March 2019. The review examined the experience of teaching and learning in RSE including; the curriculum, the approach to learning, the supports needed, and ways to improve the experience of RSE for students. Engagement in the review was considerable and signals the level of interest and concern people share in relation to this aspect of education. We are now engaging in consultation to ensure the findings and draft advice is reflective of the needs of students, schools, and parents.

In responding to the findings and draft advice on the future directions of RSE it is recommended that you read the draft report or the summary of the draft report both of which are available here <https://www.ncca.ie/en/updates-and-events/consultations/review-of-relationships-and-sexuality-education-rse>.

Please provide some brief background information on your organisation (if applicable).

Youth Work Ireland is the largest youth organisation in Ireland. We are made up of 21 Local Member Youth Services and a national office. We support our members to deliver an [Integrated Youth Services Model](#) to young people in their communities. This means that young people around Ireland can avail of a whole range of services and supports when they need them.

The approach

Across all stakeholders, there was strong agreement that RSE needs to be more than information about biological aspects of growing up and sexual activity. It needs a holistic approach that balances discussion about the risks and dangers associated with relationships and sexual activity with discussion about the positive, healthy and enjoyable aspects of relationships. A holistic approach can be understood as teaching and learning about the cognitive, emotional, physical and social aspects of relationships and sexuality. It aims to equip children and young people with knowledge, skills, attitudes and values that will empower them to: realise their health, wellbeing and dignity; develop respectful social and sexual relationships; consider how their choices affect their own wellbeing and that of others; and understand and ensure the protection of their rights throughout their lives.

To what extent do you broadly agree/disagree with the proposed direction on the approach to RSE that has emerged from the review? Please tick your response in the box below.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
X			

What are the aspects of the proposed approach that you agree/disagree with?

The Approach set out in the Review Document very much rhymes with our experience of working with young people and the views expressed by young people to us and in survey work we have carried out.

In our own work and research including a survey of over 1000 young people in 2018 inclusive sex education has emerged as a key issue for young people, who tell us that current RSE is inadequate, not fit for purpose and does not reflect or address the needs of young people growing up in Ireland today. Ireland has changed in the last decades, we are a more inclusive, equal and progressive society and sex education in Irish schools must reflect this.

The survey showed that young people are not turning to their parents or teachers for information about positive and healthy sexual relationships. Instead they are turning to social media, the internet and worryingly, pornography.

What else is important when considering the approach for teaching SPHE/RSE in schools?

Schools clearly have a critical roll to play but other actors inside and outside are important too. Youth services have played a role both in and out of school as have others. Some changes to the DCYA funding schemes may play a role here so this needs to be taken in to account. Clearly quality control for all providers would be important. Also, the respective roles of teachers, schools and non-school actors need to be clear. There may be different relationships with children and indeed different legal and safeguarding responsibilities.

The curriculum

The Review highlighted the need to create a single integrated curriculum that sets out the learning for SPHE/RSE as one subject and incrementally provides continuity of experience from early childhood to post-primary. In the immediate term the NCCA will develop interim guidelines to support the current curriculum on how it can be approached in a more holistic way and provide clarity on how topics can be taught in an inclusive manner to incorporate current themes identified by the review.

To what extent do you broadly agree/disagree with the need for a single integrated curriculum for SPHE/RSE? Please tick your response in the box below.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
X			

Please provide a reason for your level of agreement/disagreement.

Once more this is consistent with out experience and research. The “teaching” of this topic if such a word is accurate will need a lot of flexibility but also ensure common issues, themes and subject matter is covered. Most of all it needs an innovative and participative approach. A didactic approach will not suffice (indeed this is an issue across all subjects). Young people at different ages may have different experiences and questions and despite the need for “normalisation” the topic may still lead to tension, insecurity and vulnerability between pupils, teachers, and others. Disclosures may be made, and these may not always be clear. Pupils’ primary experiences of relationship issues at an older level may well be between each other or indeed fellow pupils in the actual class. Furthermore, pupils are generally older in school due to later starting and transition year. Many future pupils will finish school at 19 and are thus adults in their final year.

What else do you consider important in relation to future curriculum development in SPHE/RSE?

The consultation and involvement of students as envisaged in the document is crucial. Schools are not always the most participative environment, and we need to understand there is a considerable imbalance in power in the school. It would then be important that involvement is meaningful, done in the right context and produces tangible results. Once more we believe the youth work sector could assist in some of these methodologies.

Creating the conditions for effective RSE

The Review makes it clear that teachers need in-depth and sustained training and support in the area of SPHE/RSE. Consequently, access to professional development needs to be enhanced at pre-service and in-service levels. The Review also identified the need to take stock of current teaching and learning resources available in this area.

To what extent do you broadly agree/disagree with the Review’s findings on the necessary conditions for effective SPHE/RSE? Please tick your response in the box below

Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
X			

Please provide a reason for your level of agreement/disagreement.

This is self-evident for any form of curriculum change but particularly for this process. However again we need to step back from the traditional school environment, culture and methods. Our education system is highly regulated and indeed regimented. The points race and other factors do not lend themselves to the most emotionally sensitive topics. Curriculum change and training

while important are not the whole picture, we need a major culture change in schools which will change many things along with improving this area.

What else do you consider important in order to create the conditions for effective SPHE/RSE?

As above a change in school culture, leadership, and the power dynamics. The curriculum reform at senior level will also be important.

There is also an issue of timing and urgency. Curriculum reform seems to work at a different time pace to other things and takes a long time. The reform of the Junior Cert is a case in point, often further issues of bedding down and industrial relations add to this. Young people do not have this amount of time. Our research shows online pornography is supplanting the role of educators in this space which is something that needs to change.

A young person starting secondary school would practically be finished there by the time a particular piece of curriculum reform is delivered from the outset to being in the school. This process must improve and respond speedily to the needs of young people.

Other considerations

The Review concluded that comprehensive oversight and support for SPHE/RSE is required to meet the needs identified in the review process. The Review also found schools cannot do it alone and parents must be encouraged and supported in assuming their responsibility for their child's learning. In addition, it suggests that post-primary schools require further support and guidance in planning for junior cycle wellbeing in order to enhance students' learning in SPHE/RSE.

To what extent do you broadly agree/disagree that these are important considerations for SPHE/RSE? Please tick your response in the box below.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
X			

Please provide a reason for your level of agreement/disagreement.

Once more the support and guidance are critical, but it may well need to go further than the school itself. While youth participation on boards is provided for it is not properly supported and resourced and neither is the role of parents.

Are there any other considerations that should be highlighted in the advice for SPHE/RSE?

The [Oireachtas Committee Report on Relationships and Sexual Education](#) has made a number of recommendations which both support and echo the views held by our young people. The report recommends the teaching of inclusive sexual health education and amendments to be made to the Education Act 1998 to remove of the role of ethos as a barrier to the teaching of sexual health education

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