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Department of the Taoiseach  
Government Buildings  
Upper Merrion St  
Dublin 2

22 July 2021

A Thaoisigh,

We write to express our concerns about the new *Flourish: Relationships and Sexuality* programme that is due to be taught in most primary schools from September 2021. The Irish State has committed to promoting inclusivity and diversity. The Irish government has also publically admonished Hungary for their recent policy on the framing of sexuality in Hungarian primary schools. It is regrettable then that a programme containing negative messages of exclusion that are damaging to the long term well-being of children and to the body politic in general will be approved by the State for inclusion on the Primary School Curriculum. This is unacceptable, particularly when it is the taxpayer who is funding the delivery of the programme.

The current RSE programme is under review by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA). At the same time, the NCCA is being side-lined by the launch in September of this new Flourish programme. Instead, this Flourish RSE programme is proposed as the replacement RSE programme in all schools under Roman Catholic patronage.

The Council for Catechetics of the Irish Bishops Conference developed the Flourish programme as a supplement to SPHE curriculum in Primary schools. It conflates education on relationships and sexuality with a religious ideology/perspective on these topics. This means that the Flourish programme does not align with international best practice. It does not support children and young people to understand, and to contribute to, an open, inclusive society that accepts people with different beliefs, sexualities and genders. Bearing in mind the negative impact of exclusionary views and practices in relation to sexuality, repeatedly identified in research, on so many children and young people, it is deeply negligent of the State to allow this situation to be formalised in one of the curricular areas in the State system.

Recent, high quality research on RSE programmes indicates that effective and suitably designed RSE programmes should be scientifically based, provide young people with body autonomy, and have an emphasis on human rights and gender equality. The Flourish programme does not align with these recommendations.

Despite the commitment of successive government policies to diversifying the governance of schools, the vast majority (90+ %) of schools in Ireland remain under Catholic Church patronage and management. Consequently, if Flourish is rolled out as proposed, almost all children in the State will receive RSE that does not conform to best practice. It will form and

shape negative views among children in relation to some sexualities/identities and in some cases, it will serve to form and shape negative views of themselves. This is an intolerable proposition. Furthermore, parents have extremely limited options for their child to attend a non-denominational school, so many have to send their child to a faith-based school. This will leave parents with a choice of not only withdrawing their children from religion classes, as is the current practice, but also withdrawing their child from RSE (when school-based RSE *in addition* to education and guidance from parents is considered best practice). This begs the question: just how much lost teaching time can the State Education System legitimise? We feel that this is a complete failure on the part of the State, which is required to ensure “*that the children receive a certain minimum education, moral, intellectual and social*” (Article 42.3.2).

It is important that children and adolescents are taught about reproductive healthcare, relationships and sexualities in a way that is age-appropriate and provides impartial, factual information. Taking this approach supports the positive psychological and physical health development of young people. The proposed Flourish programme does not conform to best practice for RSE and is not inclusive. The insistence that the Roman Catholic Church’s teaching on marriage being between a man and a woman cannot be omitted from the Flourish programme contradicts the civil definition of marriage and the wishes of the majority of Irish citizens. The programme contains negative messages of exclusion that are damaging to the long term well-being of the younger citizens of this State and should not be rolled out in tax-payer-funded schools.

Considering the above, we propose:

- that the Dept of Education intervenes to stop the introduction of the Flourish programme in Irish primary schools and to ensure that all schools comply in full with the NCCA RSE curricular guidance;
- that the government acts on the report of the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Skills which advocated for inclusive RSE with a stronger focus on relational dimensions;
- that whichever RSE syllabus is ultimately deployed in the primary education sector, it would be compliant with the precepts of equality and devoid of religious indoctrination.

Is sinne, le meas,

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The Committee of the LGBTI Staff Network at University College Dublin  
The Committee of the LGBT+ Staff Network at National University of Ireland, Galway

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