

ASTI Submission to draft Senior Cycle SPHE Curriculum

November 2023

Introduction

The announcement of the public consultation on the draft Junior Cycle SPHE in July 2022 was welcomed by the ASTI on the basis that the current curriculum was introduced in 2000 and a revised curriculum was long overdue. Society has changed dramatically in the intervening 20+ years - as evidenced in legislation, amendments to the Constitution and wider state policy around diversity and equality, in particular gender equality. The ASTI also noted that technology and social media had profoundly altered the social world which adolescents inhabit. A revised SPHE should aim to enable students to develop the social, emotional and cognitive skills to navigate a rapidly changing social world.

The development of the revised junior cycle SPHE curriculum was based on extensive consultation, especially with young people who clearly communicated that they want age-appropriate holistic education on the issues they face growing up including healthy relationships, sexuality, wellbeing, being safe online, bullying and gender-based violence.

In its 2019 submission to the NCCA consultation on Relationships and Sexuality Education, the ASTI underlined the need for an updated SPHE curriculum for junior and senior cycle. It

unwelcomed the decision of the then Minister for Education and Skills to review the Relationship and Sexuality. The Ministerial decision was informed not just by its introduction almost twenty-five years ago, much has changed in Irish society and the curriculum needs to be updated with reference to:

- Consent, what it means and its importance
- Developments in contraception and reproductive health
- Healthy, positive sexual expression and relationships
- Social media and its effects on self and social relationships
- LGBTQ+ - diverse genders and sexualities
- Pornography

Student wellbeing is increasingly to the forefront in education policy as our society responds to exponential social changes. Relationships and sexuality are intrinsic to human wellbeing and are of profound developmental importance to adolescents. Unlike previous generations, today's adolescents are making the transition from childhood to young adulthood in a culture which is always 'online' (1) and which is characterised by the pervasive sexualisation and commercialisation of young people – as was highlighted in the similarly-titled 2015 study by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs. (2)

The ASTI believes that every student has a right to quality RSE irrespective of school ethos. At the heart of every educational project is the concept of respect for the learner, their agency and their needs. Young people need the information, skills and values to understand and enjoy their sexuality, to have safe and fulfilling relationships and to take responsibility for their own and others sexual health, safety and well-being. It should be of deep concern to policy-makers that research demonstrates that young people get most of their information on sexuality from the internet, including online pornography. (3) This reality of the lack of adequate education on sexualities and genders in schools is underlined in the 2017 consultation on the LGBT+ national youth strategy. (4) It is incumbent on the education partners to develop a new RSE programme which is firmly focused on the best interests of the young person, is comprehensive in its content and available in every school to every student in each year of their second-level education.