

## **Submission by the Association of Secondary Teachers, Ireland to the Joint Committee on Children and Equality**

### **Re: Technology, Social Media and Children – Ensuring Online Safety and Well-being**

Chair and Members of the Committee,

On behalf of the Association of Secondary Teachers, Ireland, representing over 21,000 second-level teachers, I welcome the opportunity to address you on technology, social media and children's safety and well-being.

Teachers work every day at the intersection of adolescence, education and digital culture. Technology has enormous potential for learning and inclusion. However, the rapid growth of social media and algorithm-driven platforms presents serious risks for students and for teachers. Child safety must be paramount.

#### **Protecting the school community.**

Safe, inclusive schools benefit both students and staff. While serious online incidents are not everyday occurrences, their impact can be profound. Recent ASTI research indicates that approximately one in five second-level teachers has experienced work-related cyber-bullying. Such abuse undermines professional authority and damages mental health.

Teachers' public-facing roles make them particularly vulnerable to anonymous harassment, defamation and, in rare but deeply distressing cases, image manipulation or threats. ASTI has developed a Digital Rights Hub to support members with preventative advice, reporting pathways and guidance on legal rights.

Where possible, issues should be resolved within schools through established anti-bullying policies, using restorative and educational approaches. However, out-of-hours online behaviour frequently spills into the classroom, disrupting learning and well-being.

#### **Platform accountability and regulation.**

The responsibility for policing harmful content cannot rest solely with schools or parents. Social media companies must bear meaningful accountability. Informal arrangements, such as expedited reporting channels, are welcome but insufficient. We believe educational bodies should have statutory Trusted Flagger recognition across major platforms.

Robust enforcement by Coimisiún na Meán under Ireland's Online Safety framework and the EU Digital Services Act is essential. We recommend mandatory 24-hour removal of abusive or illegal content involving minors or educators, stronger age verification, transparent moderation decisions and meaningful sanctions for repeated non-compliance.

Regulation must also examine algorithmic design. Engagement-driven recommender systems can amplify harmful material and draw young people into dangerous online "rabbit holes." It is not enough to regulate content; we must also regulate the systems that promote it.

## **Digital well-being and the school environment.**

Schools must remain safe, focused spaces for learning. ASTI supports national guidance restricting mobile phone use during school hours. Phone-free policies reduce cyber-bullying, prevent unauthorised recording, and improve concentration and social interaction.

The “always on” culture fuels anxiety and fatigue for students, while teachers face growing expectations of constant availability. The right to disconnect is critical to a healthy digital ecosystem.

Digital citizenship education must also be embedded across the curriculum so that students understand and recognise misinformation and know when and how to seek help. This requires proper resourcing and dedicated support in schools.

## **Proportional enforcement and emerging technologies.**

While most incidents should be resolved at school level, some behaviours constitute criminal offences and require referral to An Garda Síochána. Clear national protocols would help schools determine when escalation is necessary.

Generative AI presents new risks, including deepfake imagery and the amplification of harmful content. Teachers need systematic, state-funded professional development to respond effectively to rapidly evolving technologies.

In conclusion, technology should empower young people, not expose them to harm. By combining whole-school preventative approaches, meaningful platform accountability, proportionate legal enforcement and sustained investment in digital literacy, Ireland can create a safer online environment for children and those who educate them.

ASTI remains committed to constructive engagement to ensure that our schools remain places of safety, respect and focused learning in the digital age.

Thank you.