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Blog article by Dr Michael Wardlow, Chief Commissioner, Equality Commission NI

Northern Ireland Anti-Bullying Week: 13-16 November 2017

I have no doubt that all of us, at some time, came up against 'the school bully'. Whether it was an overt threat made to us, or the more subtle menacing stare, bullying remains a persistent long-term problem which requires a strategic solution with appropriate dedicated resources. Such a response needs to provide safety and security for the victim, otherwise policies can remain aspirational documents.

Bullying can have a detrimental effect on a pupil's life and the repercussions of being targeted can last long after the victim's school days. It can affect a person's confidence and self-esteem and in the worst cases, it may leave long lasting mental scars and trauma which can have an impact on life chances. This is not 'their problem'. All of us, whether parents, carers, teachers, pupils and citizens, have a role to play to tackle bullying when we witness it. There can be no place for the onlooker.

Despite the determination of so many to eradicate it, we know that bullying is happening right now in schools across Northern Ireland. It needs to be challenged in all its forms - whether it is the traditional face to face or the more recent version of "virtual" so called "cyber bullying". It can never be justified and must never be tolerated.

It should come as no surprise, therefore, that bullying has been identified as one of the six key inequalities identified in the Commission's recently published statement on Key Inequalities in Education. Research shows that more than two out of five minority ethnic students have experienced racist bullying and harassment, while a staggering over six out of ten trans pupils and students with same-sex attractions have been targeted because of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

Disability is also a target for bullies with two pupils in five who live with a disability reporting having being bullied. Even students with a special education need are not exempt. These startling statistics point to very real, lived experiences of our children and young people. Let me be clear, bullying can have a very real impact on pupil's school attendance and attainment. It can infect their life after school as well, as so often victims

report reduced levels of self-confidence, including as adults.

The Commission has been vocal in its support to help find solutions to eliminate bullying. We fully engaged in the legislative process to bring forward Northern Ireland's anti-bullying legislation. We are also members of the NI Anti Bullying Forum. We are working with a range of people and organisations across the education sector to refine and develop our policy positions on education following on from our key inequalities work. We want to influence public policy, in order to develop the proper framework which will give us the tools to eradicate bullying and challenge stereotypes across the education sector.

'Anti-Bullying Week 13 – 16 November' which is coordinated by the NI Anti Bullying Forum is an important campaign to acknowledge and support. The focus on bullying shines a light on a problem that far too often lurks in the dark. Bullying can have a devastating impact on people's lives. This is a problem that will not be solved overnight but must be continually addressed on a daily basis with rigour and effort. We must challenge bullying in our education sector to protect our young people and to prevent it impacting on the next stage of their lives.

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