



Equality Commission

FOR NORTHERN IRELAND

Equality in Education

Addressing bullying and tackling stereotypes

June 2022



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Introduction

1. Prejudice-based bullying at school can blight the lives of young people, negatively affecting their attendance and attainment as well as having a long-term impact on their life chances.
2. The Commission's [Statement on Key Inequalities in Education](#) highlighted prejudice-based bullying as a persistent problem for certain equality groups, including: trans pupils; minority ethnic students including Irish Travellers; students with SEN or a disability; and students with same sex attraction.
3. We welcome that the [Addressing Bullying in Schools Act \(NI\) 2016](#) provides a definition of bullying, places new duties on Boards of Governors to prevent bullying and requires schools to record all bullying incidents including those motivated by prejudice. We are of the view that this legislation, if implemented effectively, has the potential to support the development of more inclusive learning environments. Specific recommendations in relation to the legislation and its implementation are made below.
4. The Addressing Bullying in Schools Act came into force in September 2021. It remains clear however that up-to-date research is required on the impact and prevalence of prejudice-based bullying, as existing sources are now dated.

5. The need to tackle the high incidence of prejudice-based bullying, both within schools and the wider community is a key challenge for Government and has been recognised as such by international treaty bodies.
6. While the Commission will work to encourage prompt action to address the above, we also encourage action by stakeholders and government to advance our full range of recommendations, with a particular focus on tackling the inequalities identified in 2017 [Statement on Key Inequalities in Education](#).
7. The remainder of this document sets out our specific recommendations relating to tackling bullying and challenging stereotypes.
8. We encourage you to take steps to raise awareness and secure implementation of our recommendations. Help us make change by sharing these recommendations with colleagues, officials, and friends and family; writing to your local political representatives; and by responding to any consultation related to equality in education in support of our recommendations.
9. Our full range of recommendations relating to education is available at www.equalityni.org/Education/Policy

Summary of recommendations:

- The Department of Education should undertake comprehensive research to establish, and track over time, the prevalence and nature of prejudice-based bullying, and to assess school compliance with the Addressing Bullying in Schools Act;
- The Department of Education and Education Authority should ensure their guidance on complying with the requirements of the Addressing Bullying in Schools Act, and on responding to and preventing incidents of bullying behaviour, is comprehensively implemented and updated as required;
- The Department of Education should ensure actions to tackle unintentional acts of prejudice-based bullying, which are not covered by the statutory definition of bullying, are adequately dealt with in guidance;
- Strong and visible leadership from the school principal, senior management team and board of governors is needed to promote an anti-bullying culture within every school;

- The Department and other stakeholders should ensure that support materials and opportunities within the curriculum comprehensively address prejudice-based bullying;
- Measures to tackle bullying should include challenging gender roles to further the broader societal aim of preventing gender-based violence;
- Legislative protection from disability-based harassment should be extended to schools.



Recommendations

The Department of Education should undertake comprehensive research to establish, and track over time, the prevalence and nature of prejudice-based bullying, and to assess school compliance with the Addressing Bullying in Schools Act.

10. Records of incidents of prejudice-based bullying, as required by the Addressing Bullying in Schools Act, are currently retained at school level and are not collated or analysed by the Department of Education (DE). In this context, it is essential that data is collected now (at the commencement of the legislation) and thereafter on a rolling basis, potentially via an all-pupil Northern Ireland level survey, to track the prevalence of bullying. The findings must be disaggregated by equality categories. This will allow the Department and wider stakeholder groups, including the Education Authority, management bodies and representative groups, to gauge the effectiveness of current interventions and focus attention on areas of concern. Consideration should also be given as to how best to gather data on the prevalence, nature and any specific impacts of cyber-bullying.

11. Linked to this is the need to establish levels of compliance by schools and Boards of Governors with their duties under the Addressing Bullying in Schools Act. This would allow analysis of practice generally, and specifically in relation to areas where the legislation is not prescriptive. Schools have discretion within the legislation to collect and monitor one-off incidents of bullying and cyber-bullying. Data could be gathered via qualitative and quantitative surveys in addition to routine Education and Training Inspectorate inspections. This analysis would highlight any inconsistencies across schools and allow training needs to be identified. It would also provide information on the extent to which particular bullying motivations are recorded and may demonstrate a requirement, as permitted under the legislation, for the list of motivations to be amended.



The Department of Education and Education Authority should ensure their guidance on complying with the requirements of the Addressing Bullying in Schools Act, and on responding to and preventing incidents of bullying behaviour, is comprehensively implemented and updated as required.

12. We welcome the comprehensive guidance developed by DE, EA and the NI Anti-Bullying Forum – [Effective Responses to Bullying Behaviour](#), and recommend that it is promoted within schools to ensure consistency of approaches in recording, responding to and preventing incidents of bullying behaviour. It is essential that pupils are encouraged to be open about reporting incidents of bullying. Implementation of this guidance can contribute to such openness.
13. The Commission welcomes the duty on boards of governors to secure measures to prevent prejudice-based bullying. We welcome the guidance and training materials provided to assist schools, including the senior management team and Governors, on their specific remit and role(s). We recommend that this should also be incorporated within initial teacher education. Regularly updated in-service training for staff on the impact of prejudice-based bullying and on the strategies to tackle and prevent it is also necessary. A review of the effectiveness of the guidance and training materials is recommended in the fifth year of its operation.

The Department of Education should ensure actions to tackle unintentional acts of prejudice-based bullying, which are not covered by the statutory definition of bullying, are adequately dealt with in guidance.

14. The common definition of bullying included in the 2016 Act contributes to ensuring a consistent approach is taken across schools to tackling prejudice-based bullying.
15. However, we consider that guidance for schools to support the implementation of the legislation should also encourage schools to address unintentional acts by pupils that can cause harm, fear or distress to pupils for reasons associated with their equality characteristics. Training for teachers, within initial teacher education and continuing professional development, should include guidance on dealing with such acts.

Strong and visible leadership from the school principal, senior management team and board of governors is needed to promote an anti-bullying culture within every school.

16. High-level leadership is essential to ensure the consistent and robust implementation of policies and practices designed to address bullying, including bullying experienced by Section 75 groups.

17. We also consider that schools should proactively promote awareness of the existence, content and intent of the anti-bullying policy and procedure within the school and respective roles, responsibilities and expected behaviours. This awareness raising should extend to the families of pupils and include signposting to relevant guidance.
18. The [Effective Responses to Bullying Behaviour guidance](#) provides a range of whole school interventions which can be used to establish and maintain an anti-bullying culture. Interventions include improving school ethos by assessing how safe, happy and welcome pupils feel; integrating anti-bullying measures across the curriculum; and considering thematic responses should a particular form of prejudice-based bullying (e.g. racist, sectarian) occur. The recommendations made by Estyn, the Welsh schools' inspectorate, in relation to effective actions to address bullying should be adopted.



The Department and other stakeholders should ensure that support materials and opportunities within the curriculum comprehensively address prejudice-based bullying.

19. We have impressed upon the Department the need to ensure that equality and good relations are embedded within the curriculum, and that opportunities within it are used to draw attention to prejudice-based bullying and to encourage a greater understanding of and respect for pupils covered by the Section 75 grounds. This includes, for example, gender identity; ethnicity; and sexual orientation.
20. We welcome that the Effective Responses to Bullying Behaviour guidance states that: ‘the use of curriculum resources and staff development opportunities can help within a prevention framework if a particular issue has been highlighted by repeated incidents. It may be appropriate for the school community as a whole to reflect on how the school’s ethos tackles bias, discrimination and prejudice around specific issues such as sectarianism, racism, social class and so on.’

a. Gender identity

21. The 2013 [Grasping the Nettle](#) report highlighted that '[t]he exclusion of trans issues from the school curriculum reduces trans equality and inhibits good relations from developing.' The report acknowledged that while DE was undertaking work to address this problem, 'much more needs to be done to increase awareness, understanding and knowledge of trans issues in educational settings.' We recommend that steps are taken to increase awareness, understanding and knowledge of trans issues in educational settings.

b. Ethnicity

22. We reiterate our recommendation that the Department should seek to ensure that ethnic minority children see their culture and language reflected in the classroom and school curriculum; disseminate best practice procedures around induction and admissions; and provide guidance on promoting the participation of newly-arrived children in the wider life of the school.

23. We note the proposed action in the Racial Equality Strategy, the Executive Office (TEO) to work with DE to identify ways to tackle racist bullying in schools. We understand that inter-Departmental discussions have taken place with regard to the action, and we call on the TEO to set out, as a matter of urgency, how it intends to implement this 2015 proposal.

c. Sexual orientation

24. A 2011 [Cara-Friend/Rainbow Project](#) report conveyed that there were ample opportunities within the statutory curriculum to challenge negative stereotypes and present the diversity of sexual orientation to children and young people, but that the experience of lesbian, gay and bisexual young people is that these opportunities are not taken up by teachers in schools. 2013 [research by Rainbow](#) on the emotional health and well-being of young LGBT people found that 88.1% reported that teachers never or rarely talked about LGBT issues.



Measures to tackle bullying should include challenging gender roles to further the broader societal aim of preventing gender-based violence.

25. In support of actions to aid the prevention of domestic and sexual abuse, the Commission has recommended specific action to institute coordinated, comprehensive and coherent measures to counter gender-based stereotypes and prejudicial attitudes from an early age and across all areas of life, including in all stages of education. It is essential to challenge gender stereotypes and prejudicial attitudes from an early age, as gender-based stereotyping can begin in childhood and continue throughout life stages.
26. In addition, we note that the Gillen Review recommended that ‘The Department of Education should strongly encourage school boards of governors to introduce awareness sessions to ensure students understand the consequences of posting on social media’.

Legislative protection from disability-based harassment should be extended to schools.

27. The Commission continues to call for reform to Northern Ireland's disability discrimination laws.
28. Currently, under disability discrimination legislation in Northern Ireland, there is no freestanding protection for disabled people against harassment related to their disability outside employment and further and higher education.
29. This contrasts with protection which exists within legislation in Great Britain and under Northern Ireland equality law on other equality grounds, for example there is a freestanding right giving protection against harassment under the race equality legislation across both employment and non-employment areas (on the grounds of race, ethnic origin, and national origin only).



Conclusion

30. We have set out in this document a number of specific recommendations for action to tackle bullying and challenge stereotypes.
31. The Commission will continue to engage with government, relevant Departments and key stakeholders to secure advocacy and adoption of our recommendations
32. We encourage you to take steps to raise awareness and secure implementation of our recommendations. Help us make change by sharing these recommendations with colleagues, officials, and friends and family; writing to your local political representatives; and by responding to any consultation related to equality in education in support of our recommendations.
33. For further information, including supporting rationale and evidence base, visit www.equalityni.org/Education/Policy





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