



## **IPPN Submission**

### **Cineáltas Action Plan on Bullying**

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## Introduction

From a school leadership perspective, the implementation of the Bí Cineálta procedures represents a significant and welcome step toward fostering inclusive, safe, and respectful school environments. The ambition of the Department of Education through the Cineáltas Action Plan on Bullying is evident in its whole-school approach, commitment to consultation, and emphasis on ongoing review and improvement.

However, the successful realisation of these objectives within the required timeframe (2023–2027), does present a substantial leadership and management challenge at school level.

The requirement for each school to develop, implement, and annually review its Bí Cineálta policy with meaningful input from the entire school community, including students, parents, and all staff demands significant coordination, planning, and reflective practice. In addition, schools are expected to:

- engage with and embed extensive professional development across all staff
- ensure accessibility and communication of supports
- lead cultural change in areas such as bullying prevention, equality, diversity, and inclusion
- and contribute to national data collection processes.

While the provision of training and resources is a critical support, there remains a notable gap in the allocation of dedicated leadership time to effectively lead this work within schools. School leaders are already managing complex and expanding responsibilities. They need discrete, protected time to:

- coordinate consultation processes
- lead policy development and review
- support staff engagement with professional learning
- monitor implementation and impact
- and respond to incidents in a timely and restorative manner.

## Discrete Leadership Time

It is essential that consideration be given to the allocation of specific leadership time and, where possible, additional leadership capacity to support the full and effective implementation of Bí Cineálta procedures. This could take the form of additional leadership and management time, additional leadership capacity, or structured support at system level. Such investment would not only enhance the quality of implementation but would also ensure that the vision of Cineáltas to create school communities where every child feels safe, respected, and valued is fully realised in practice.

Dedicated leadership time is not an optional support, but a critical enabler of meaningful implementation.

From a school leadership perspective, the focus on culture and environment within the Cineáltas Action Plan on Bullying is both timely and necessary. The development of a positive school culture and learning environment is also a central tenet of IPPN's 2024 *Guide to the Leadership of Teaching and Learning*. The commitment by the Department of Education to support schools in developing a School Culture and Values Declaration, alongside the introduction of structures such as Student Support Teams and designated wellbeing leadership roles, reflects a strong understanding of the importance of whole-school approaches to wellbeing. However, the expectations associated with these developments represent a significant expansion of leadership responsibilities at school level.

The requirement for all schools to develop and publish a School Culture and Values Declaration grounded in meaningful consultation with the entire school community demands careful facilitation, time for engagement, and ongoing reflection to ensure that such declarations are lived in practice rather than remaining aspirational statements. Should this become a mandatory requirement, the need for structured leadership capacity will become even more pronounced.

Similarly, the proposed establishment of Student Support Teams in larger primary schools is a welcome and progressive step. However, the successful implementation of such teams will require sustained coordination, clear role definition, regular meeting time, and ongoing evaluation. School leaders will be central to embedding these structures effectively, particularly as guidance emerges following the pilot phase.

The proposal to assign a designated person within the leadership team to promote wellbeing and lead on bullying prevention is also a positive development. However, it is essential to recognise that this role carries substantial responsibility, requiring not only expertise and training but also sufficient time allocation to:

- coordinate whole-school wellbeing initiatives

- support staff in responding to complex incidents
- engage with parents and external agencies
- and ensure alignment with broader school policies and practices.

While the provision of guidance, pilots, and professional supports is welcome, there remains a critical need to align these expectations with the operational realities of school leadership. Without the allocation of discrete, protected leadership time and, where appropriate, additional leadership capacity, there is a risk that these important initiatives may be implemented in a fragmented or superficial manner. Effective culture-building, by its nature, requires sustained, relational, and reflective work that cannot be absorbed into already stretched leadership roles.

Therefore, consideration should be given to:

- providing dedicated leadership and management time for middle and senior school leaders
- ensuring that new roles are matched with appropriate time and capacity
- and supporting schools with practical implementation structures, not solely guidance documentation.

## Infrastructure

The vision for strengthening school culture and environment is both commendable and necessary. Its success, however, will depend on the extent to which schools are resourced, not only with guidance and training but with the time and leadership capacity required to embed meaningful and lasting change.

From a school leadership perspective, the commitment within the Cineáltas Action Plan on Bullying to embed bullying prevention within the physical design of school buildings is both progressive and welcome. The intention by the Department of Education to ensure that future school design guidelines prioritise shared, collaborative, and recreational spaces reflects an important recognition of the role that the school environment plays in student wellbeing, supervision, and positive social interaction.

However, there is a significant disparity between this forward-looking vision and the current realities in many schools. A considerable number of primary schools continue to operate without access to adequate indoor recreational spaces. This presents ongoing challenges, particularly in the context of Ireland's climate, where outdoor play

is not always feasible. In such circumstances, students may spend break times in classrooms or confined areas.

While the development of updated design guidelines is an important step for future builds, many existing schools will not benefit from these changes without targeted investment in infrastructure upgrades. School leaders are therefore managing the implementation of Bí Cineálta procedures and broader wellbeing initiatives within physical environments that are not always conducive to these aims. While the focus on school design as a preventative measure is both necessary and commendable, its impact will remain limited unless the deficits in existing school buildings are addressed. Ensuring that all schools have access to appropriate indoor recreational space is a critical enabler of safe, inclusive, and supportive school environments.

## Professional Development

The commitment within the Cineáltas Action Plan on Bullying to review and enhance leadership programmes is both necessary and welcome. From a practical leadership perspective, there are important considerations regarding sustainability, accessibility, and continuity of professional learning. School leadership is not static. Each year, new principals, deputy principals, and assistant principals are appointed, many of whom take on their roles after initial training has taken place. This raises a key question: how will newly appointed leaders access the same level of training and support in a timely and structured way?

In addition, the complexity of the Bí Cineálta procedures and the broader wellbeing agenda depends on ongoing professional development that allows school leaders to:

- revisit and deepen their understanding over time
- respond to emerging challenges within their school contexts
- and lead whole-school approaches with confidence and consistency.

Without protected time to engage with training and translate learning into practice, the impact of even high-quality programmes may be diminished.

The provision of online courses on cyberbullying within the Cineáltas Action Plan on Bullying is a positive and necessary initiative. Supporting teachers to develop the knowledge, skills, and confidence to both educate students about online safety and respond effectively to incidents of cyberbullying is increasingly critical in the current digital landscape. However, the level of engagement with these courses to date raises concern. With 254 teachers completing the courses in the 2023/2024 academic year,

and a further 104 enrolled by December 2024, participation remains low relative to the total number of teaching staff nationally.

This presents a practical challenge for school leaders. While schools are encouraged to promote engagement with these courses, the question arises as to how leaders can realistically ensure that both they themselves and their staff remain up to date in the area of online bullying without more structured support. Cyberbullying is a rapidly evolving issue, requiring continuous professional learning rather than optional or one-off engagement. School leaders are expected to lead informed, consistent responses to incidents and to embed preventative education across the curriculum. However, without widespread staff participation in relevant training, this creates a risk of uneven understanding and practice within schools. In addition, there is a need to support school leaders directly in this area. Leaders must not only be aware of current best practice but also be equipped to guide staff, respond to complex incidents, and engage with parents and external agencies.

## Student and Parent Voice

The commitment within the Cineáltas Action Plan on Bullying to provide accessible training for parents and guardians is both important and necessary. The role of parents in supporting children to both understand and navigate bullying behaviour is critical, and the provision of training through the National Parents Council represents a valuable support. The delivery of 120 training sessions during 2024 is a positive step. However, from a practical school perspective, a key challenge remains: how can we ensure that all parents have a genuine opportunity to access and benefit from this information?

Engagement with parent-focused initiatives can vary significantly across school communities. School leaders are frequently tasked with promoting these opportunities, yet without structured supports and flexible delivery models, uptake may remain uneven. There is also a role for clear, consistent national messaging to reinforce the importance of parental engagement in this area, alongside practical supports that make participation more feasible for all families. In addition, school leaders would benefit from guidance on how best to engage parents, ensuring that efforts are inclusive and equitable.

The emphasis within the Cineáltas Action Plan on strengthening student voice through the development and updating of student council structures is both positive and aligned with best practice. The work of the Department of Education in reviewing the *Student Councils: A Voice for Students* resource has the potential to further support

schools in embedding meaningful student participation. The high level of uptake at post-primary level (approximately 99.6%) demonstrates the value and feasibility of student councils in those settings. However, the significantly lower level of establishment in primary schools (approximately 67%) points to underlying structural and capacity challenges that need to be acknowledged and addressed.

In many primary schools, particularly smaller settings, all teachers including members of the leadership team are engaged in full-time teaching. This creates a practical difficulty in establishing and sustaining student councils in a meaningful way. These responsibilities demand time and continuity. In contexts where there is limited or no discrete leadership and management time for leadership and coordination roles, student councils risk becoming unsustainable. To support the effective development of student councils in primary schools, consideration should be given to:

- recognising the time and coordination required
- providing dedicated leadership and management time
- offering flexible models of student voice that are adaptable to smaller schools
- and ensuring that updated guidance reflects the diverse contexts of primary schools, rather than assuming a one-size-fits-all approach.

In addition, practical supports and exemplars tailored to smaller schools (i.e. those led by teaching principals) would enhance the feasibility of implementation.

## School Clusters

The proposal within the Cineáltas Action Plan to encourage the development of school clusters to support wellbeing initiatives is both innovative and potentially very beneficial. The intention by the Department of Education to facilitate collaboration, shared practice, and collective capacity-building across schools is particularly welcome in the context of preventing and addressing bullying and promoting inclusive school environments. However, there is currently a lack of clarity regarding the progress of this action, particularly in light of the indication that, during 2024, only internal consideration had commenced.

From a school leadership perspective, further detail is needed on timelines, pilot structures, and how schools will be supported to engage meaningfully with this initiative. In addition, there are important contextual considerations, particularly for smaller schools. In many rural communities, schools are geographically dispersed, with limited proximity to neighbouring schools. This presents practical challenges in forming

and sustaining clusters, including travel time, substitute cover, and the coordination of meeting schedules. School leaders, many of whom are teaching principals, already operate within significant time constraints, making it difficult to identify opportunities within the school day to engage in cluster activity.

The Small Schools Project clearly demonstrates how small schools can work successfully in clusters and this model has proven successful. Without adequate supports, there is a risk that engagement in clusters may be limited to schools with greater capacity, thereby undermining the equity and shared learning potential of the initiative. Furthermore, clarity on the intended outcomes, expectations, and evaluation of the pilot phase will be important in building confidence among school leaders and encouraging engagement.

## School Staff

The findings presented under *Views of Community and Education Stakeholders* within the Cineáltas Action Plan on Bullying are broadly positive and reflect a strong commitment across schools to fostering safe, inclusive, and respectful environments. Survey responses from 1,336 principals and teachers (which informed the 2024 report) indicate very high levels of confidence in school climate and practice. The vast majority reported positive school atmospheres, strong standards of behaviour, and a clear prioritisation of student safety and belonging. There was also strong evidence that anti-bullying policies were embedded in practice, with high levels of confidence in their availability, implementation, and effectiveness.

In addition, most respondents indicated that students are being taught to recognise and respond to bullying behaviour. However, some areas of concern emerged. Notably, there is less certainty regarding parental involvement in the development and review of anti-bullying policies. These findings suggest that, while policies are well-established, there is still scope to strengthen meaningful engagement with the wider school community.

A key concern from a school leadership perspective relates to the consultation process underpinning the next report. While survey data was gathered for the previous report, it is unclear to what extent school leaders and teaching staff were meaningfully consulted in shaping the 2025 report, interpreting its findings, or informing next steps.

Given that school leaders and teachers are central to the implementation of Cineáltas actions on a day-to-day basis, their direct input is critical to ensuring that findings are fully contextualised and that recommendations are practical, relevant, and achievable.

Therefore, clarification is sought on what opportunities will be provided for deeper engagement with practitioners in the next phases of policy development and review. In conclusion, while the survey findings are encouraging, meaningful and ongoing consultation with school leaders and all staff will be essential to ensure that the implementation of Cineáltas is both effective and grounded in the realities of school contexts.

## Future Wellbeing-related Frameworks, Guidelines and Plans

It is not clear at a glance which actions in the Action Plan are for schools and which are for the DEY and its agencies. A colour-coding schema would facilitate review and engagement with the publication by the different stakeholders.

The work outlined in the Cineáltas Action Plan overlaps in many ways with the DEY Wellbeing Framework and Guidelines. Several other frameworks and guidelines could also be included within one overall Cineáltas/Wellbeing in Schools Framework, for example

- Inclusive practices regarding SEN
- Inclusion regarding disadvantage/DEIS
- Behaviours of concern
- Crisis situations/restraint
- Child protection
- Others?

Simplification and integration would be highly valued by those tasked with understanding, piloting, implementing and embedding such practice in schools.