



# Mental Health School Flag Project

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A Summary Report of Findings and Learning from a  
Pilot Project targeting Schools in County Kilkenny

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Kilkenny  
County Council  
Comhairle Chontae  
Chill Chainnigh

St Patrick's  
Mental Health Services



An Roinn Leanaí  
agus Gnóthaí Óige  
Department of  
Children and Youth Affairs

“

We want young people to have better coping skills in dealing with issues affecting their mental health. As school is where they spend a significant amount of their young lives, it's only fitting that school is an environment where young people feel supported and safe. We think this can't be 'spoofed' - it needs to be a whole school approach. Only through real, innovative, fun and genuine efforts by the school to involve young people in talking about their mental health will this be achieved. We need to reach the point where all young people feel that it's ok not to be ok.

”

*Kilkenny Comhairle na nÓg Members, 2012*



Full Report written by Dr. Gerry Jeffers, 2016

Available at: <http://www.comhairlenanog.ie/local-comhairle/kilkenny/>  
[http://www.kilkennycoco.ie/eng/Services/Community\\_Culture/Comhairle-na-nOg/](http://www.kilkennycoco.ie/eng/Services/Community_Culture/Comhairle-na-nOg/)

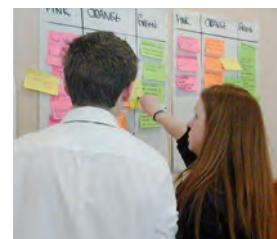
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Steering Committee

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## Kilkenny Comhairle na nÓg Steering Committee Membership

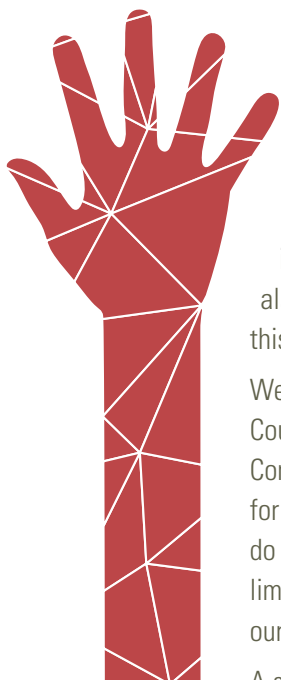
Kilkenny Comhairle na nÓg Steering Committee members are:

Comhairle na nÓg members	(on a rotating basis)
Clr. Malcolm Noonan	Kilkenny County Council
Clr. Maurice Shortall	Kilkenny County Council
Ms. Bríd Hynes	Kilkenny County Council - Community Development Section
Mr. Joseph Mguni	Kilkenny Comhairle na nÓg (Coordinator)
Ms. Meabh Mc Guinness	Health Service Executive - Health and Wellbeing Division
Ms. Kate Carroll	Foróige
Ms. Saoirse Prendergast	Kilkenny Carlow Education & Training Board - Youth Officer
Mr. Paul Bolger	Ossory Youth
Ms. Mairead Maddock	Kilkenny Children & Young Peoples Services Committee
Ms. Alison Allan	Kilkenny LEADER Partnership

Supported by:

Ms. Edel McGrath      Department of Children & Youth Affairs Participation Officer

# Acknowledgements



Firstly, we would like to acknowledge the commitment, energy and determination of young members past and present of Kilkenny Comhairle na nÓg who not only came up with the idea of a Mental Health School Flag but also made sure the idea was progressed to this point.

We would like to thank Kilkenny County Council and the Comhairle na nÓg Steering Committee for nurturing an environment for young people to do what young people do best - look beyond the boundaries and limitations we can sometimes set for ourselves.

A sincere thank you to St Patrick's Mental Health Services, and in particular to Ms. Madge O'Callaghan, Youth Advocacy Platform Coordinator, for their invaluable contribution and support at a time when it was needed most.



Finally, there were many individuals and organisations that contributed in no small way in advancing the Mental Health School Flag project at various times along the way. Without the local and collective 'shoulder to the wheel' in Kilkenny and beyond, this project would not have been possible.


To the following, we would like to express our sincere gratitude:

- Dr. Paul Downes  
(St. Patrick's College, Drumcondra)
- Mr. Martin Rogan  
(Mental Health Ireland)
- Lifeline Mental Health Youth Sub-Group
- The participating schools in the initial planning workshops
  - Duiske College,
  - Kilkenny City Vocational School,
  - St. Johns Senior Primary School and
  - Moneenroe National School
- The participating schools in the pilot project
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  - Duiske College, Graiguenamanagh and
  - Kilkenny City Vocational School
- All post-primary schools that participated in the survey carried out by the Evaluator

We would also like to thank:

- Ms. Angela Campion  
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- Dr. Gerry Jeffers  
(Evaluator and author)
- Ms. Jacinta Purcell  
(Ossary Youth)
- The Department of Children and Youth Affairs
- Kilkenny LEADER Partnership

# Foreword



Children and teenagers spend approximately a third of their childhoods in school. Their experiences here impact immensely on their emotional well-being and development. In particular, this experience has a major bearing on how they view themselves socially and intellectually, and whether they believe they are clever, good at achieving things and popular. Their experiences in school teach them how to get on with others, how to work and how to compete.

For this reason, it is very important that school provides children with the best opportunity for them to protect and enhance their emotional health. Academic achievement is secondary to this key priority and indeed without emotional health academic achievement often becomes irrelevant.

This is why St Patrick's Mental Health Services supports the Kilkenny Comhairle na nÓg

Mental Health Flag Project. The project's aims, the promotion of mental health education in schools and empowering young people to advocate for mental health rights, are consistent with St Patrick's Mental Health Services Empowering Recovery strategic objectives.

The report provides an overview of the impact and effectiveness of the Mental Health School Flag Project. This research indicates that awareness among teachers of how they impact on the emotional wellbeing of students is high, and many schools already run a number of wellbeing initiatives.



It indicates that teachers and students would benefit further from a framework for these initiatives that will complement the school curriculum.

This report highlights the need for a national approach for mental health education, and offers a framework on how to achieve this. The recommendations within

the key findings, such as involving young people in the development of initiatives, the examination of language used when talking about mental health to students, and the benefit of collaboration amongst schools are timely given the recent launch by Minister for Mental Health and Older People Helen McEntee of the National Taskforce on Youth Mental Health.

The on-going development of St Patrick's Mental Health Services' school strategy, through our advocacy initiative Walk in My Shoes, highlights the willingness of the school community to increase its capacity in the area of mental health.

Over the past number of years Walk in My Shoes has delivered a series of resources for schools, including a mental health education film for primary and secondary schools, a #MindYourSelfie mental health resource pack for teachers, and the provision of a dedicated Mental Health Outreach Officer available to visit schools throughout the country.

I wish to congratulate Kilkenny Comhairle na nÓg for their commitment and dedication to developing an innovative and progressive initiative which will impact on the mental health of many young people.

**Mr. Paul Gilligan**

CEO, St Patrick's Mental Health Services

# Introduction



In recent years many radical and innovative approaches have emerged in addressing the multiplicity of mental health challenges faced by young people in what seems to be a pressurised and rapidly shifting world. These challenges are compounded by a myriad of outside influences that weren't part of school culture in the past;

social media, being the most notable.

When Kilkenny Comhairle na nÓg members pitched their idea of a Mental Health Flag for schools to our steering committee following their AGM in 2012, it was met with one part apprehension and one part excitement. The journey that these inspirational young people have taken since then has been impressive. It has been an exhaustive search for new ways of engaging young people to take control of their mental health. Developing the mental health flag project also attempts to challenge all of us who hold positions of responsibility for the wellbeing of young people to work tirelessly towards a common aim of putting in place stuff that works and is proven to work.

This evaluation report attempts to encapsulate that journey and to reflect on a process that in the view of our steering committee could prove invaluable in contributing to how we collectively approach the challenge of whole school approaches to mental and emotional wellbeing. What has been evaluated here is a body of work that was imagined, designed and animated by a group of young people involved in Kilkenny Comhairle na nÓg since 2012. That's pretty impressive! If ever there was a need for an exemplar for participation in Comhairle or indeed for the value of listening to the

voices of young people in developing plans or programmes for young people, then look no further than here.

All Comhairle members involved in this project were thoughtful and provocative, highly motivated and singular in their collective vision. The future is safe.

It is my hope that this evaluation report will prove useful for all who work towards the mental wellbeing of our young people; not just in our schools but in the wider community too.

If anything the process itself has proven useful in gaining a deeper understanding of the complexities of working with young people and mental health in the school environment and bringing together the disparate strands needed for that work to be consistent, sustainable and above all, safe.

I think the work that our Comhairle members have done will prove an important step in reaching our collective goal and towards helping our young people to go out into the world, confident and filled with purpose and happiness.

## **Cllr. Malcolm Noonan**

Chairperson of the Kilkenny Comhairle na nÓg  
Steering Committee







# 1. Background & Context



## 1.1 Kilkenny Comhairle na nÓg

Comhairle na nÓg has its origins in the National Children's Strategy in 2000 which in turn arose from Ireland's ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989). Comhairlí na nÓg are child and youth councils in the 31 local authorities of the country, which give children and young people the opportunity to be involved in the development of local services and policies. A Comhairle na nÓg comprises young people aged 12-18 years, elected at an annual AGM to represent their respective electoral area on issues affecting young people.

Kilkenny Comhairle na nÓg is made up of 24 young representatives from the four electoral areas in Kilkenny: Castlecomer, Kilkenny East and West and Piltown. The group meets on average every two weeks to discuss issues and establish a way with local decision makers to resolve those issues that affect the majority of young people.

## 1.2 An idea conceived by young people

The Mental Health School Flag concept was identified through discussions at the Comhairle na nÓg AGM in Kilkenny in October 2012 and its development has formed a substantial part of each annual work plan of the Kilkenny Comhairle na nÓg since then.

From 2013 to 2015, the framework for achieving bronze, silver, gold or platinum flag status has been developed by a collaborative process of engagement led by subsequent Kilkenny Comhairlí with young people, mental health professionals, the Kilkenny Comhairle na nÓg Steering Committee and the Lifeline Mental Health Youth Sub-Group. For illustration purposes, the framework for achieving the 'platinum' standard can be viewed in Appendix 1.

## 1.3 What is the Mental Health School Flag Project?

The Mental Health School Flag Project is a framework for schools to ensure that mental health and mental health awareness is an integral part of the school environment and to provide recognition for the many ways that schools are positively contributing to the wellbeing of young people's mental health.



Schools can voluntarily opt into achieving the flag by organising an in-school committee representing pupils, teachers and parents and adopting a 'whole school' approach to mental health awareness. There are four flags or 'standards' schools can aim to achieve; bronze, silver, gold or platinum. Each flag has a set of standards in the form of a checklist that the school must attain before being awarded the flag. The checklist allows schools flexibility and room for innovation and focuses on the areas of student engagement, the school environment, school culture and school policy.



## 1.4 From Local to National - the vision for a National Mental Health School Flag Programme

By and large, the development of the concept at local level has relied on the voluntary commitment of young people, local organisations, mental health activists and St Patrick's Mental Health Services with additional financial support from the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, Kilkenny County Council and Kilkenny LEADER Partnership. Whilst the energy and commitment at local level has been inspiring, it was always clear to Kilkenny Comhairle na nÓg and the Steering Committee that taking the concept into a national arena would require a commitment from larger 'players' such as the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, the Department of Education and Science and the Department of Health.

Therefore, this pilot was an attempt, with limited resources, to take an original idea from young people to develop the concept on paper and to trial and evidence it in a variety of real school environments. The intention was to provide a strong basis, and indeed a rationale for the relevant government departments to take the concept and grow it further.

## 1.5 Piloting the Mental Health School Flag Project

The process of piloting and testing the concept began in January 2015. A Project Manager was contracted by Kilkenny County Council on behalf of the Steering Committee to engage three primary and three post-primary schools in the pilot over a six-month period. It is important to note that the primary schools did not engage in the pilot and therefore did not form part of the evaluation undertaken. The short time frame was indicative of the resources available to the project at the time and due to a variety of circumstances participation in the pilot project was mixed and centred on the three post-primary schools. Schools appointed in-school coordinators to apply the framework to their particular contexts.

The evaluation of the pilot project was commissioned by St Patrick's Mental Health Services in late September 2015. This is a summary report of the key findings from that evaluation.

The full report is available at:

<http://www.comhairlenanog.ie/local-comhairle/kilkenny/>

[http://www.kilkennycoco.ie/eng/Services/Community\\_Culture/Comhairle-na-nOg/](http://www.kilkennycoco.ie/eng/Services/Community_Culture/Comhairle-na-nOg/)

<https://www.stpatricks.ie/youth-advocacy-service>

## 1.6 Methodology used to evaluate the Mental Health School Flag Project

The evaluation of the Mental Health School Flag framework was carried out in the period of October – December 2015. Qualitative data was gathered using small group and one to one interview techniques and a survey. All relevant stakeholders involved in the development and pilot of the Mental Health School Flag Project were consulted and the data was compiled with key emerging themes identified and highlighted in a full report, presented to the Kilkenny Comhairle na nÓg Steering Committee in July 2016.

The relevant stakeholders were:

- Kilkenny Comhairle na nÓg members (past and present)
- Representatives from participating schools (and in some cases targeted but non-participatory schools)
- Kilkenny Comhairle na nÓg Steering Committee
- The Pilot Project Manager
- CEO, St Patrick's Mental Health Services
- The Director of the Kilkenny Education Centre
- A local Psychotherapist (consulted at the initial stages of the pilot)



## 2.

# Key Findings and Learning

It was foreseen by the key drivers of the Mental Health School Flag Project that piloting a project of this nature within a short six-month timeframe would have a negative impact on how the concept of a Mental Health School Flag is received and implemented in schools locally and this was borne out in some of the resulting qualitative feedback. A limitation of resources to pilot the programme at a desired level was a key factor. However, notwithstanding this, the key stakeholders viewed the pilot as a worthwhile endeavour to begin creating a body of evidence that would encourage future take up and development of the concept.

These are the key findings and extracted learning:

### 2.1 The importance of a youth voice in developing initiatives for young people

One of the reasons for including an extensive range of young people's voices in the full report is to illustrate how informed and engaged students are about their wellbeing. They also indicate how the challenges young people face continues to change. Their concerns, for example, about mental health, drug and alcohol use, sexual behaviour, technology including social media and pornography and the inter-relationships between all of these, point to the value of consultative fora like Comhairle na nÓg in dealing with wellbeing issues.

### 2.2 The value of a mental health framework for schools

Schools are busy places and often feel inundated with requests to take part in numerous initiatives, surveys and pieces of research. It is worth noting that the various people mentioned above engaged well with this process, itself an indicator of the relevance, even urgency, with which they regard youth mental health issues.

It is also very evident from the data that schools are already engaged in an impressive range of activities that can be grouped under a 'wellbeing' or 'mental health' umbrella.



The pilot phase suggests that a structure such as the framework gives an additional impetus and focus to this work.

### 2.3 The value of a universal, government-led approach

The Comhairle na nÓg Steering Committee members selected six schools with a view to having a geographical spread throughout County Kilkenny as well as aiming at schools which had, up to then, limited engagement with Comhairle na nÓg.

Coincidentally, the three schools that participated are part of the DEIS programme. However, in a reminder of the sensitivities associated with labels such as 'disadvantage', the students in at least one school were suspicious that neighbouring schools were not participating in the pilot stage. They wondered was there an implicit association between mental health issues and 'disadvantage'.

Some expressed reservations about 'outsiders' coming in to school environments. They indicated wariness about what some call 'well-intentioned' individuals and organisations.

Also, sustaining a project of this nature requires additional funding and organisational expertise. A government department (e.g. Dept. of Children and Youth Affairs, Dept. of Education and Skills, Dept. of Health) - or a combination of departments and, possibly, other groups - should consider building on the pilot project and on this evaluation to advance an award related framework for positive mental health in schools at regional and national levels.



## 2.4 The importance of understanding the reality of the school environment

In some cases there was a perception, whether valid or not, that outside agencies regard schools as failing in their promotion of mental health. Understandably, schools resent such implications. Furthermore, outside agencies don't always appreciate how rigidly structured the school days, indeed, the full school year, can be. Disruption of established routines is not always welcome. Indeed, because Transition Year (TY) is the most flexible year in the six-year cycle, a danger is that too many initiatives get squeezed into TY and not enough are aimed at the other five years.

An important message from the evaluation for the project is that further development will require close liaison with schools to ensure outside interventions complement existing school-based provision.

## 2.5 The considerable availability of mental health supports for schools

A very striking reality to emerge from the evaluation is the extensive range of possible support services within County Kilkenny which could enhance the school experience. The evidence from the students in 'Curlew College\*' about the value of youth work services underlines this. The nature of schooling can lean towards schools becoming, as it were, 'self-contained bubbles'. Mental health is an obvious area where harnessing local and national expertise can be appropriate and effective. The African proverb 'It takes a village to raise a child' is a reminder to schools that working in collaboration with other professional and voluntary community groups, when done well, can enrich young people's learning.

## 2.6 The persistent 'sensitivities' of mental health as an issue (and the associated language around it)

Despite its positive literal meaning, for some, 'mental health' can carry negative connotations. Some informants noted that 'mental health initiatives' are often suggested as responses to incidents and patterns of self-harm and suicide. A number, including some school principals, indicated a preference for the language of 'wellbeing' rather than of 'mental health'. Parental concerns were mentioned on a few occasions, for example, in relation to what were interpreted as 'suicide prevention' initiatives. Comments from parents like 'I'm not comfortable that my son is listening to all this talk about suicide' were reported by more than one principal. Anecdotal evidence from other parts of the country suggests that student deaths by suicide can be very traumatic for a school community. Thus, 'mental health issues' are sometimes seen as 'raw' and 'especially sensitive'.

## 2.7 A Mental Health School Flag (or similar framework) complements work already being done

It is clear from the survey of the participating schools that many schools see themselves as already addressing mental health issues quite adequately. They point to SPHE (Social, Personal and Health Education) and other school programmes as well as a wide variety of initiatives.

Some schools have found the structured support outlined in 'Well-being in Post-Primary Schools Guidelines for Mental Health Promotion and Suicide Prevention', (DES/HSE/DoH Ireland, 2013) and 'Responding to Critical Incidents, Guidelines for Schools' (DES, 2015) helpful.

\*In the evaluation report, the author used pseudonyms for the different schools in the interests of anonymity



## 2.8 A framework - yes. But maybe not a flag

There are mixed views about the key idea in the project of a 'flag'. Some are uncomfortable about what they perceive as 'flagwaving' about such a sensitive topic. 'If, God forbid, you get a flag one week and then the following week you had a serious critical incident in the school, I wonder how people might react', reflected one principal. Many take the analogy with the Green-Schools Flag but point out that 'wellbeing' and 'environmental action' are very different concepts. Some fear schools will be overrun with flags. The proposed gradations - bronze, silver, gold and platinum - make some people uncomfortable because of the implied hierarchy and a danger of appearing to pitch one school against another. Others would prefer more focus on intentionality – a school's willingness to address the issues, rather than on perceived 'achievements'. The phrase, 'I fear it could be reduced to a tick-box exercise', was mentioned more than once. Whether one agrees with these reservations or not, they do draw attention to the need in any educational innovation to consider possible unintended consequences.

That said, there is strong support in schools for the essence of the Comhairle na nÓg proposal: a framework to encourage schools to engage with wellbeing issues. Further consultations with schools might tease out the precise focus of the award, if 'award' is what is intended. Some suggestions included using the 'Fair Trade Model' rather than the

'Green Schools' one or to consider something similar to the 'WorldWide Global School Passport' for development education. Other suggestions included having a plaque or certificate of participation rather than a flag or having an annual event, preferably in County Hall, where schools might present, possibly in a short film, how they are promoting wellbeing. This could coincide with a fair where community groups might display their work.

## 2.9 Schools can benefit from collaborating with each other

This project, as originally conceived, saw schools in 'stand-alone' terms. It would appear that some sharing of experiences/activities/viewpoints among both teachers and students between two or more schools could be very enriching for all concerned and help further 'normalise' discourse related to mental health issues. Indeed, in developing the project further some inter-school co-operation might be an essential part of the enterprise.

## 2.10 Primary schools & mental health - an unanswered question

The original intention was to pilot the project in both primary and post primary schools but for a range of reasons, this did not happen. It is important to assert that during the evaluation, no good reason emerged as to why primary schools could not be encouraged to apply this framework to promote wellbeing. The draft guidelines might be refined in consultation with teachers, students and parents to make the framework more accessible to a primary school environment.



## 2.11 Wellbeing within schools

As part of the evaluation process, a survey was carried out across the sixteen post-primary schools in Kilkenny with fourteen of the schools participating.

The school responses to five questions on mental health promotion offers a valuable set of pointers as to how schools see themselves addressing wellbeing. Some inter-school learning may result from the responses and may possibly support schools to look at their current policies and practices. A first strand of analysis might relate to obligatory curriculum provision, in particular the quality of SPHE programmes but also the atmosphere and general climate of everyday classrooms.

A second, might be to do with other school supports for all, including pastoral care structures, tutors, year heads and as well as the role of specialists such as guidance counsellors, home school liaison personnel, chaplains, learning support teachers and others. A third strand of analysis might look at the wellbeing related skills of the school staff and the ongoing development of these skills. A fourth strand might identify how once-off events - such as visiting speakers - as well as extra-curricular activities support student and staff wellbeing.

A fifth, might look further beyond the school, asking how best the school can harness the goodwill and expertise of statutory and voluntary agencies, locally and nationally.

A sixth strand might analyse the quality of caring relationships across the school: between students and teachers, among students themselves, among teachers, with support staff, between teachers and parents, between school leaders and the rest the school community.

A seventh line of enquiry and analysis might be to map how well students' voices are heard, formally and informally. The DES/HSE/DoH (2013) guidelines of wellbeing are especially useful in assisting schools frame a fresh approach.

One indication of the challenges facing SPHE is illustrated by the status of the subject at senior cycle. The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment has published a Curriculum Framework built around five areas of learning: Mental health, Gender studies, Substance use, Relationships and sexuality education and Physical activity and nutrition. Imaginative and appropriate assessment and evaluation procedures are also outlined.

However, this is optional for schools to implement. There is limited evidence that SPHE is actually timetabled on a regular basis at senior cycle.



### 3. Conclusion

The level of commitment to this mental health initiative at local level has been inspiring; not least by the involvement and drive of young people involved with Kilkenny Comhairle na nÓg.



Much work has been done on developing the concept, trialling it in a limited number of schools and beginning to generate learning from that process. But there is considerably more work to be done. In that regard, Kilkenny Comhairle na nÓg has taken it as far as it can with the resources it has.

We now invite the relevant governmental departments, be it the Department of Children & Youth Affairs, the Department of Education & Skills, the Department of Health or indeed all three to continue where we have left off.

The hope of all the stakeholders mentioned in this summary report is that this concept will not end up on a shelf gathering dust or be academically criticised for the limited pilot process but that it will be seen as a truly original concept with unlimited and untapped potential.





# Appendix 1

**Checklist for a participating school to achieve 'Platinum' for illustration purposes**  
(as set out in the Post-Primary Mental Health School Flag Guidelines Booklet)

Platinum Flag	Tick if achieved	Notes
Does the school have an appointed MHSF Coordinator?		
Does the school have a MHSF Committee representing the whole school community?		
Did the MHSF Committee receive training in relation to mental health?		
Does the school make a reasonable effort to raise awareness of mental health to the whole school community on a continuous basis?		
Do pupils have clear, private and accessible sources of information regarding supports for mental health issues relating to bullying, sexual orientation, separation, family issues or other?		
Do pupils have and know they have access to a non-teaching adult to talk about an issue whilst protecting their anonymity from their peers?		
Does the school have a buddy system in place for 1st Years?		
Does the school host events for Mental Health Week that encourage quieter / shy / marginalised pupils to positively participate in the school community, be more aware of issues, etc?		
Has the school delivered mental health tuition as set out in SPHE?		
Has each year been able to avail of a retreat outside of the school premises?		
Has the school provided additional supports for students to cope with exam pressure?		
Has the school delivered workshops to Transition Year students relating to mental health using outside agencies such as GROW, Kilkenny Lifeline, Foróige, The Samaritans, AWARE, Ossory Youth etc?		
Has the school a clear anti-bullying policy and evidence to show that the policy is being thoroughly implemented?		





Platinum Flag	Tick if achieved	Notes
Has the school raised awareness on behalf and in support of the LGBT student population and the issues affecting them in coming / not coming out?		
Can the school evidence a wide and varied curriculum of non-academic activities that encourages niche participation and diversity of pupils?		
Has the school organised mental health workshops for parents?		
Has the school a dedicated 'quiet' chillax room for pupils to sit, read, listen to music and recreate?		
Does the school diary display information on accessible, free and confidential services for young people with mental health issues?		
Have all the teaching staff, administration staff, SNA's, Canteen staff and caretaker staff received training on mental health?		
Has the school developed and implemented a positive mental health policy for the whole school?		
Have all the teaching staff, administration staff, SNA's, Canteen staff and caretaker staff received training on mental health?		
Has the school gone the extra mile for and can evidence an innovative youth project relating to mental health (consider a mural, youtube video, a play...)		
Other 'WOW' factor? Please detail.		
.....		
.....		
.....		
.....		



**St Patrick's**  
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