

A Supportive Education System for the LGBTI+ Community

Discussion Document



"Homophobia has a cure: Education."

Introduction

“The majority embraced the minority” is probably the best way to describe the landmark referendum in May 2015 which enshrined marriage equality in the Irish Constitution.

The referendum was hard fought and took personal bravery from many; we wish to pay tribute once again in particular to An Taoiseach Leo Varadkar for opening his world to the country, An Tánaiste Simon Coveney who acted as Fine Gael’s Director of Elections and Tom Curran, who made the case for change so eloquently. Many of our public representatives went above and beyond, and the generations that follow owe them a debt a gratitude.

It is symbolic how one referendum, no matter the margin of victory, can completely change a society; it can be a powerful catalyst for change. 4 years on some may think the journey for LGBTI+ equality is complete but there is still work to do.

Our education system has a pivotal role to play in that change. Education in many ways defines people. It is of critical importance the education not only tackle homophobic and transphobic bullying but also offers the support people need if they are struggling with who they are.

This document sets out some ideas we in Young Fine Gael, believe would make our education system more supportive for all.

We hope it sparks a conversation around the need to constantly change and adapt so our schools and educational institutions reflect our society.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Conor McGowan". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Conor McGowan
Director of Membership and Engagement

Section 1: Creating A Supportive Environment

Without a doubt growing up in general can be difficult and people from all walks of life reach out to councilors and chaplains in schools throughout Ireland. While all mental health support is welcome, we must ensure balance is offered. The vast majority of schools in Ireland have a religious ethos; in these schools non-religious counselling should be available to all. Religious institutions are often not supportive of the LGBTI+ community and it is important schools realize this and take the necessary steps to offer the appropriate support when it is needed. While in third level the need for non-religious supports is negated, we firmly believe that second and third level counselors should be required to have the appropriate qualifications to offer compassionate care to the LGBTI+ community.

Action Point 1: Non-Religious Counselling In Schools

Action Point 2: Appropriate Qualifications

Young Fine Gael is advocating for Gender neutral bathrooms in second and third level campuses across the country. We do not want the complete removal of gendered bathrooms we are simply advocating for choices to exist across the country. Gender neutral bathrooms offer a safe and supportive environment for transgender students. For transgender individuals using gendered bathrooms can be a difficult experience particularly in single sex schools this simple change in schools could make a big difference to people's lives.

Action Point 3: Gender Neutral Bathrooms

Every student in every school we believe has a right to feel safe, secure and supported. Therefore, we are advocating for a zero-tolerance approach to homophobic and transphobic bullying, while the 2013 Anti Bullying Document Produced by the Department of Education includes homophobia in its definition of bullying¹, we strongly believe gender identity should be added. As this document was written in 2013 we also believe cyber bullying sections should be updated to reflect the advancement of social media in Ireland.

Action Point 4: Add Gender Identity to the Department of Education Definition Of Bullying

Action Point 5: Strengthen Cyber Bullying Sections

Within our education system we need to further create an environment where people are able to indicate their preferred pronouns and identity. The addition of an "other" option, where gender is asked on forms such as CAO forms and other official documentation. While we recognize this would require significant inter departmental work we believe it would a positive step forward

Action Point 6: Allow for the inclusion of "other" as a gender on CAO forms

¹ <https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Policy-Reports/Anti-Bullying-Procedures-for-Primary-and-Post-Primary-Schools.pdf> Page 8

Section 2: Ending The “Us And Them Mentality”

As a youth organization we have recent experiences of the education system. Many of the experiences of sexual education fall far short of the knowledge needed to lead a healthy lifestyle. While the incomplete sexual education for heterosexual students is a cause for concern the lack of LGBTI+ sexual education is alarming. Particularly when we see rising rate of HIV and the burden of STI occur with men who have intercourse with other men aged between 15-24.² Urgent reform of sexual education is needed. The “Provision of Objective Sex Education Bill 2018” currently at 3rd stage we urge the government to make this bill a legislative priority and for the Department of Education to begin preparation for its implementation as early as September 2019.

Action Point 7: Make the “Provision Of Objective Sex Education Bill 2018” A Legislative Priority

Action Point 8: Begin Preparations to Deliver A LGBTI+ Inclusive Sexual Education Programme

While a diverse sexual education programme would certainly be welcome other actions must also be taken. To combat a lack of understanding we are proposing time in transition year be given to allow students to complete short courses on the issues affecting transgender students and other members of the LGBTI+ community. It is also important to ensure all students mental well-being and to openly discuss mental health to further reduce stigma

Action Point 9: TY students should be offered safe talk training

Action Point 10: A student friendly workshop similar to BELONG to corporate workshops should be developed and offered to students

² <https://www.hivireland.ie/hepatitis-and-stis/stis/sti-statistics/>



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