

**Interim Report**  
**Task Force on Student Behaviour**  
**in Second Level Schools**  
**June 2005**

## Introduction

Minister,

When you established this Task Force in Spring 2005, you asked that we “consider and report on the issue of student behaviour in second level schools”. To carry out this task you brought together, under my Chairmanship, a group of people with a wide range of expertise and credibility in the Irish education system. Since our establishment we have sought to be faithful to the mandate which you gave to us, and we have sought to construct an authentic profile of the issues that are of concern to school communities as they go about their work of educating the students in their charge. The Terms of Reference that make up our mandate are as follows:

- To examine the issue of disruptive student behaviour as it impacts upon teaching and learning
- To consider the effectiveness of strategies at present employed to address it
- To advise on existing best practice both nationally and internationally, in fostering positive student behaviour in schools and classrooms
- To make recommendations on how best to promote an improved climate for teaching and learning in classrooms and schools

In setting up the Task Force you acknowledged the complexity of the task before us. At the launch in February you pointed out that the Task Force was set up, not because there is a crisis in the school system due to disruption, but because you anticipated that the Task Force would have the capacity to be a consolidating measure aimed at preserving the orderly and harmonious environment that characterises most schools. Your expressed wish was also that the work of the Task Force would help to support and offer solutions to schools experiencing difficulty in the challenging area of student disruption. Your press release on announcing the establishment of the Task Force stated “**I want the work of this Task Force to provide a solid foundation for developing policies and best**

**practice in our schools into the future. I expect that the Task Force will be linking closely to a wide range of interests across our education system on this very important issue.”** In the course of our work we have been influenced by this overarching statement and by the Terms of Reference that you set for us. This is the framework within which the Task Force has gone about its work and what follows is an interim report on our deliberations and progress to date.

*Maeve Martin*

*Task Force Chairman*

## Procedures

The Task Force went about its work in the following ways.

### 1. Call for submissions

The national press of January 27th, 2005 (*Foinse*, January 30th) carried a notice inviting interested individuals and organisations to make submissions on the issue of student behaviour in second level schools to the Task Force, as part of the review process. The closing date for receipt of submissions was March 31st, 2005. In all, we have received 149 submissions. These came from agencies, advocacy groups, from school groups comprised of teachers, parents and students, and also from individuals.

### 2. Invitation to the Partners in Education

The Task Force decided at its inaugural meeting of February 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2005 to write to the partners in education and invite them to come and meet with us. The Task Force is very keen to work collaboratively with the partners and it has benefited greatly from the rich submissions, both oral and written, which have come from the partners. In all we met with eight groups, as follows:

- The Association of Secondary Teachers, Ireland (ASTI)
- The Teachers' Union of Ireland (TUI)
- The Joint Managerial Body (JMB)
- The Irish Vocational Education Association (IVEA)
- The National Parents Council, Post Primary (NPC, Post Primary)
- The National Association of Principals and Deputies (NAPD)
- The Association of Community and Comprehensive Schools (ACCS)
- The Union of Secondary Students (USS)

We agreed a schedule with the partners by which two representatives from each of the groups made an oral submission to the Task Force over the course of our plenary meetings. The oral submissions were followed up by a substantive written submission. Taken as a whole, these constitute a corpus of significant data and document a spectrum of issues that represent the concerns and wishes of the stakeholders.

### **3. Direct approach to specific agencies**

At its opening meeting of February 3<sup>rd</sup> the Task Force identified a number of agencies or advocacy groups with high relevance and expertise in the area of youth and schooling. We wrote to seventeen of these and invited them to make submissions. Submissions were received from eleven of these agencies. One further agency acknowledged our invitation and indicated that a submission will follow.

### **4. Fora**

In your mandate to us you asked that we constitute fora of teachers, parents and students with a view to testing emerging ideas and proposals. This we have done and have found the experience to be both valuable and interesting. To date we have held fora in school communities in Cork, Galway, Dundalk, and Dublin. The data that we have gathered in the course of these meetings resonate with data that have come to us via the submissions, in the course of our dialogue with the partners and within our own plenary sessions of the Task Force. The school communities that hosted our meetings were very positive about the value of such gatherings and indicated that the model whereby students, parents and teachers sit together to discuss issues of mutual concern is indeed a worthwhile and unifying process. They joined with the Task Force in an open and honest way. All parties seemed to be respectful of the views of others and to appreciate the validity of their stance. In the next phase of our work we intend to engage in some more visits to school communities and to centres of education offering alternatives to mainstream education.

The Task Force wishes to acknowledge the cooperation of the school communities that welcomed us in a spirit of collegiality and participated in a serious way with our agenda. We are grateful to them for their investment of time and attention to our work and we hope that they, like us, benefited from the shared experience.

## **5. Plenary Sessions**

To date, the Task Force has held 10 plenary sessions. In the early meetings the time was largely taken up with meeting the partners and processing the invaluable material that they presented to us. On all occasions we were mindful of our Terms of Reference. The many submissions received both in response to the national press invitation and, following our own approach to a number of relevant agencies were circulated among the members. We shared jointly the task of sorting the data in ways that matched the Terms of Reference. Our distillation of the data has enabled us to identify a consensus set of emergent issues pertinent to the central theme of the Task Force.

## **6. The wider environment**

Alongside the data gathering here in Ireland, members of the Task Force engaged with research relevant to our mandate. It is worth noting that the phenomenon of student disruption or challenging behaviour in schools is a matter of concern in countries other than Ireland. Reviews similar to our own have recently been undertaken in other jurisdictions viz, Scotland, Northern Ireland and England, and we are drawing on these as our work proceeds. This comparative aspect has been helped by guidance and ideas that have been put before us. The education partners and organisations like the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS), The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) and The Economic and Social Research Institute have made presentations to us that have consolidated and broadened our work. They directed us to data and practices that are relevant and that will influence the recommendations that

will follow. We continue to process the material, and as our thinking develops further we will benefit from the findings, the analyses, the lessons learned and the caveats gleaned from this extensive range of information.

It is worth noting that the Task Force has experienced goodwill towards its work. The education community has been encouraging and supportive as we seek to do justice to the important work that has been entrusted to us. Our work has been eased by the courteous and willing support extended to us by staff in the Department of Education and Science. Access to the kind of backup and gracious help that we have received has made it easier for us to function and to get a good grasp on issues where clarification was required. The Task Force wishes to thank all who have shared their expertise, their concerns and their expectations with us to date. We hope that the spirit of harmony and cooperation that has been our experience thus far will permeate the next phase of our work.

The above is an account of the context of our work, and of the procedures and responses that have unfolded since our establishment. The next section focuses on the Terms of Reference given to us by you and indicates in summary form the state of our engagement with these.

## Term of Reference 1

To examine the issue of disruptive student behaviour as it impacts upon teaching and learning.

The Task Force interprets this Term of Reference as referring to the **nature** and **scale** of disruption encountered in schools and how this impacts on the core purpose of the school, viz teaching and learning. The findings here are culled from the various sources referred to above; written and oral submissions; fora of students, parents, and teachers; meetings of the Task Force personnel and from general engagement with the education community. It should be stressed that while there was serious concern about disruption levels in some schools, there was also encouraging and positive evidence that the majority of students in the school system are engaged and compliant. What was presented to us was a continuum of disruption ranging from annoying patterns of persistent “low level” misbehaviour through to less frequent incidence of gross indiscipline and evidence of rare incidents of criminal behaviour.

## **Nature of Disruption**

Examples of disruption tended to fall into the category referred to in the discourse as “low level” disruption. In and of itself any example of this category of behaviour may not seem too extreme, but the persistent and repeated nature of it, and the apparent refusal of students to discontinue with it make the role of the teacher very difficult indeed. The implications for teaching and learning are very serious. While the examples given below demonstrate behaviour that is overt, there is an equally disturbing and undermining range of student behaviour that is covert. This takes the form of apathy and negative attitudes to learning and to authority. It is very demoralising for a positively motivated teacher to encounter an atmosphere of indifference and protestation on a daily basis. It diminishes a sense of professional satisfaction and reduces the likelihood of enjoyment in the teaching and learning process. It also impacts on the attitude of peers who want to cooperate and to engage with schoolwork in an acceptable and courteous manner. Frequently cited examples of overt student misbehaviour included

- Non-stop talking
- Coming late for class
- Ongoing failure to bring relevant class materials

- Constantly challenging teacher authority
- Ignoring the presence of the teacher in the classroom
- Blatant refusal to follow instructions or to comply with requests
- Throwing paper aeroplanes/pens/ missiles when the teacher turns his/her back to the class
- Walking aimlessly around the classroom
- Using inappropriate language
- Making noises/humming
- Rummaging in bags
- Taunting and pushing
- Shouting each other down
- Eating, and chewing gum
- Using mobile telephones in ways and times that are inappropriate

There was the suggestion from the TUI that behaviour that would once have been classified as serious or “high level” disruptive, was now being classified as “low level” disruptive. In other words, the bar seems to have dropped with the passage of time and the tolerance levels that school staff display towards disruptive behaviour have had to be modified. It should be stressed that the incidences of serious breaches of discipline are rare. Our data suggest that these in effect are more easily dealt with because they are more clear-cut and in a league that warrants decisive action. The nature of gross indiscipline is such that nobody in the school community could condone it or dispute its gravity. The incidents tend to pose severe risk to the safety and well being of teachers or peers.

Examples of serious breaches of discipline that came before the Task Force and that were located at the more extreme end of the disruption continuum included

- Threats to teachers, and damage to their property
- Fighting and physical assault of peers
- Open defiance of an insolent and deeply offensive nature
- Using foul or obscene language with no regard for boundaries
- Remarks to teachers of an overt sexual nature
- The carrying of dangerous weapons into the school environment

The Task Force was of the view that some incidences reported to it were so serious that they should have been reported to the Gardaí, as they fell within the category of criminal behaviour. Again, we wish to stress that these extreme behaviours are not normative for the majority of schools, but for schools and communities experiencing them, they are a source of untold stress and suffering.

## Scale

The data reported above give a flavour of the kinds of disruption that schools are encountering. In terms of scale, the data suggest that the perpetrators represent about 5% -10% of the school population of which those engaged in extreme behaviour represent a very small proportion. There is also evidence to suggest that the challenging behaviour documented here may not be found at all in some schools in the system and, where it occurs, may be more manifest in some schools than in others. Schools cater for varying cohorts and some cohorts make heavier demands on their school personnel in terms of behaviour management than is the case in other schools. Many submissions underlined this fact, and there was a wish expressed that the responsibility of catering for disruptive students be shared as equitably as possible across the spectrum of schools in a given locality. What must not be underestimated is the toll that even a minority of disruptive students can take on those impacted by their unacceptable behaviour. The ASTI, as part of their submission, included data following a discipline survey which their association had carried out in 2004. Their findings at national level are supported by other findings recorded in research that included samples that are less extensive than the substantial and comprehensive work of the ASTI.

One such piece of work was reported to us by a sub-committee of Co. Donegal Vocational Education Committee. They formed a discipline committee in response to your initiative, Minister, in setting up the Task Force. This committee carried out a survey of 409 teachers. Their findings are in line with findings already referred to and they lend substance to the proposition that it is difficult to paint a national picture regarding the state of discipline in our schools. There is great variation in the system and so caution is advised in making general statements on this emotive topic.

Further confirmation of scale comes from The Centre for Education Services at The Marino Institute of Education, which carried out a survey in four locations. Their sample of 131 respondents included both principals and classroom teachers. The survey found, inter alia, that over 80 % of the respondents were of the view that the incidence of disruptive behaviour had increased over the past five years. Approaching the issue from a different perspective, the National Educational Psychological Service refers to the difficulty in determining prevalence of children with Emotional and Behavioural Difficulty (EBD) as definitions and thresholds may vary. They cite figures ranging from 20% to 10% to 5 %, depending on what level of disruption is under consideration.

### **The impact of disruption on teaching and learning**

The evidence gathered by the Task Force suggests that disruption impacts negatively on teaching and learning and in some classrooms impedes it altogether. It brings with it implications for all who form part of the school community - students, school staff, parents and management. All our sources of data gathering substantiate this. The range of impact is on a continuum that runs from inroads on valuable teaching and learning time, to the curtailment of innovative teaching strategies with consequences for teaching and learning opportunities, through to debilitating mental and physical health for teachers. This latter condition, in some instances, leads to an intolerable situation for some members of the teaching profession whereby they terminate their careers due to stress related illness. Examples of the negative impact of disruption include

- Teacher time taken up with sorting out disruptive incidents
- The disruption becoming infectious and spreading to other students who in a more compliant situation would be “on task”
- Students becoming intimidated or disheartened by the unacceptable behaviour of their peers
- Classroom climate suffering
- Teacher morale and sense of efficacy being diminished
- The toll on teachers becoming cumulative and resulting in stress related attrition from the profession

- The lowering of student attainments
- The curtailment of innovative modes of pedagogy
- Parents evaluating the school negatively if it fails to deal successfully in eliminating disruptive incidents
- The standing of the school in the community being diminished
- The considerable time investment for management in processing issues of disruption
- Key personnel devoting substantial amount of time to working with the minority of disruptive students to the detriment of time allocation to the more compliant

As the data show, the fall-out from disruption is serious. The Task Force wishes to stress the gravity of the impact of disruption for all concerned. The view was expressed that, in some situations, parents perceive that disruption in a school risks curtailing the attainment opportunities of their child, and so decide to withdraw their student and enrol him/her elsewhere. The loss of such students to other schools results in a lowering of morale for the school that has been adjudged unsatisfactory.

## Term of Reference 2

To consider the effectiveness of strategies at present employed  
to address disruption

The Task Force, and many of the contributors to it, are of the view that there is some overlap between Terms of Reference 2 and 3. However they will be addressed separately, although this will entail some repetition in our reporting.

As was the case with Term of Reference 1, the Task Force received a set of data on factors that are deemed to be effective in preventing and minimising disruption. There was consensus among the sources already cited that there exists a range of measures or variables that contribute to the creation and maintenance of schools that are empowered in their approach to dealing with student indiscipline. It is not intended here to list the minutiae of measures that schools adopt, but rather to conflate some effective features and report them in broad terms. Some of the most powerful strategies are linked to the calibre of school personnel. Others belong to the culture or ethos of the school while still others are linked into the range of structures and access to student welfare measures that exist within the school. Our evidence suggest that chief among these are:

### **Quality of the personnel**

- The personality and professional competence of the individual teacher as vital forces in determining the nature of the relationship that develops between learner and teacher with a knock-on effect on student behaviour
- Good quality leadership where staff, students, and parents feel valued.
- Strong, meaningful parental involvement in a spirit of partnership
- Access to continuing professional development for staff

### **Culture and Ethos**

- A school culture that is pastoral and that is empathic to the needs of students, with a climate of concern for students as individuals, but firm and consistent in its implementation of the school's code of behaviour

- A code of behaviour that is constructed and owned by all those who make up the school community, with a clear, unambiguous chain of command to ensure its faithful implementation
- A school which grants students a voice and where staff work collaboratively with students in ways that are mutually respectful
- A school that has a sense of community where students feel that they belong
- A school that reaches out to the wider community, and that works with agencies in the community so as to contribute to the enrichment of the school, and enhance the lives of those who form part of it
- A school with good communication patterns

### **Structures and Supports**

- A range of structures in operation within a school, evaluated regularly
- Access to a variety of school curricula and programmes that suit the learning needs and capabilities of a diverse cohort of students
- Teaching methodologies that engage students and that provide them with success experiences
- Early identification of difficulties with appropriate intervention
- Access within the school to extra support - counselling, remedial, behavioural, pastoral, for those students who may need this support if they are to survive and succeed within the mainstream school system
- Access to a variety of extracurricular activities
- An attractive teaching and learning environment
- A school that invests a lot of careful planning and time into smoothing the transition from primary to post primary, especially for children who are vulnerable or at risk of disaffection on entry into second level.

The data above match what is recognised as best practice both nationally and internationally.

### Term of Reference 3

To advise on existing best practice both nationally and internationally, in fostering positive student behaviour in schools and classrooms.

Schools that are examples of good practice share many of the characteristics that are outlined in the section above dealing with Term of Reference 2. Frequent reference was made to earlier work on the issue of school discipline carried out in this country. The Martin Report of 1997 included some templates of schools that were identified as models of good practice. That report, like the earlier report of the Committee on Discipline in Schools (1985) carried a series of recommendations that pointed the way towards orderly and safe school environments, conducive to quality teaching and learning. The findings of these reports appear not to have impacted in any meaningful way and there was a failure to implement many of the recommendations that would have eased the discipline situation in schools. As stated earlier, some of the partner submissions drew our attention to relevant work that has been carried out in other jurisdictions which could inform our current work. The Task Force has engaged with this corpus of work and indeed with a wider research base relevant to our Terms of Reference. It proposes to integrate this research dimension into the final report in a way that is culturally sensitive to the situation here in Ireland. For the present it seems sufficient to summarise the main thrust of this international research. It chimes with the data submitted to us from the various sources and with our own deliberations in plenary sessions. A synopsis of these data suggests that promoting positive behaviour in schools depends on a number of factors. Chief among these are:

- Effective and visionary leadership from the principal, the staff, and the management personnel of the school with support from the local education authority or equivalent
- Teachers who are skilled in a variety of teaching methodologies, who use differentiated approaches and who have expertise in positive behaviour management, with access to continuing professional development in these areas
- A school wide policy that includes a framework of expectations, rules, rewards and sanctions that is consistently applied across the school
- Access for students to a broad and balanced curriculum that is sufficiently differentiated to take account of learners' starting points, that motivates them, raises their self esteem and gives them a sense of achievement

- Access to a range of activities, cultural, sporting, and altruistic, in which all pupils can participate, that help to foster a distinctive school ethos and develop a sense of community and belonging
- Schools and parents working constructively together and communicating in an open, and respectful manner
- Access to a range of behavioural supports that help foster inclusion and integration
- Provision on-site, or in some instances off-site, for a minority of students whose behaviour warrants support not ordinarily available in the mainstream classroom

The Task Force has found it very encouraging to find a synergy between its own deliberations, the data from the key informants and the research literature. It helps to build a bridge between theory and practice, and ensures that our final recommendations will have an authenticity grounded in a context that combines both best practice and research. These recommendations will be situated within the legislative framework in which schools now operate.

## Term of Reference 4

To make recommendations on how best to promote an improved climate for teaching and learning in classrooms and schools

The Task Force realises that the most important feature of its work is to generate a set of recommendations that will impact in a positive way and will help to curtail the spread of disruptive behaviour in our schools. It also realises that the stakeholders are relying on the Task Force to get it right, as so much is dependent on the outcomes of our work. Your foresight, Minister, in establishing this Task Force signalled your interest in the issue. Our sense of that interest gives us confidence that you will implement our recommendations provided that they are practicable and have the capacity to be effective. However, at this juncture, we are not in a position to make recommendations that would do justice to the serious and complicated nature of the issues that confront us. Further time is required to identify proposals that will be well grounded and seriously evaluated. We know that these will only be of value to the extent that they contribute to solving the range of issues under consideration. Major steps in our developing work have been accomplished. The foundations have been laid. The building blocks are in place and in the continuing phase of our work, we hope to be in a position to formulate a set of recommendations that will be the result of our reflections and measured judgements.

## **The Way Forward**

We know from the Fora and from student submissions that the majority of students want to belong to a school community that is disruption free. We would wish that the cooperative behaviour of the majority of students that is the norm in schools would be embraced by the minority of less compliant peers.

We know also from our data that parents, in the main, try to inculcate in their children norms of respect and positive attitudes to authority figures. Alongside this, they hold legitimate expectations that their children will be happy in school and will achieve there in line with their talents. We hope that parent groups will act as advocates to bring as many parents as possible into ways of collaborating with schools that help to translate their expectations into reality.

We know that school staff want to work in environments that are safe and that allow them to discharge their professional role in an unimpeded way, where they enjoy the respect and cooperation of their students. We are confident that school staff will reflect on their professional practice, and will in the course of their school development planning, give consideration to many of the issues that the work of the Task Force will raise. We would like our work to encourage school staff to continue to work in a dedicated and enabling way with their young students.

We know that schools need support to carry out their demanding and multilayered roles, so we recognise that the role of management or governance is important too.

We are aware that schools need a teaching and leadership force that is skilled, visionary and open to innovation and the management of change. We are all learners in a society where the pace and scope of change have been unprecedented. Those charged with all levels of teacher education are part of this evolving picture and like the other key players, they too must assume their responsibilities in ways that are responsive to the emergent and clearly articulated needs of schools.

The Task Force anticipates that our final report will prompt many of the key players to examine current practice and to consider modification where evidence suggests that some new ways of working are required. It would be beneficial if there were to be a *teacht le chéile* of the stakeholders on the issues triggered by the work of the Task Force and followed through by appropriate action. With a concerted effort from all, facilitated and supported by the Department of Education and Science, it is possible that progress can be made on many of the issues before us. We know that the setting up of a Task Force of and in itself will not be sufficient to combat the corrosive impact of student disruption. However, we hold the view that a healthy mix of reflection on current practices, the introduction of some effective new measures, combined with some modified ways of working could produce positive outcomes. The gains from a blend of these are likely to be worth the effort. The development of norms of civility and respect in our students is a shared responsibility and consequently a shared approach is

required in its promotion. Hence the call to the total education community to contribute to the solution of the difficulties that form the substance of this interim report.

What the Task Force has decided to do at this stage in our work is to document for you, Minister, broad areas that are emerging, and that have recurred with such frequency within our work to date, that we feel that we are in a position to take them as representative of the central issues of concern. We anticipate that these will form the bedrock of our recommendations in the final report in December 2005.

In this interim report many issues are conflated. In adopting this procedure, we wish to assure our education partners that we will deal in a more comprehensive manner with the detail of their submissions in the next phase of our work. As indicated earlier, the issues we are putting before you require much consideration. The time of the Task Force to date has been taken up with data gathering and the collating of a large body of material. We want to be sure that we are on the right track, and this will entail the revisiting of the submissions and immersion in the research base. In particular, we want to engage further with the education partners to ensure that we represent accurately their concerns as put before us. All of this careful groundwork should contribute to the quality of the final work.

What follows is a synopsis of the most pressing issues. These are neither exhaustive nor prioritised, but they are the themes that were most frequently articulated and that were of definite concern. They have been culled from the sources previously cited and will inform our recommendations.

## **Emergent Issues**

### **Impact of the recent legislation**

The Task Force is struck by the impact that Section 29 of the Education Act has had on schools. In this context it should be stated definitively that respondents and submissions argued that schools are keen to work within a framework of inclusion. They recognise that all students who form the school cohort have a right to education and ideally they would like this education to be offered within the mainstream setting. However, the perception is that when a student's behaviour is such that it is resistant to all efforts to bring it within acceptable limits and is of a nature that it interferes with the learning opportunities of peers, school authorities are powerless to remove the student from the school. Schools do not seek in a knee jerk way "to permanently exclude" students who challenge the system. They are frequently at their most pastoral and supportive in dealing with these students and their parents / guardians, but still there remains a minority of students whose persistent challenging behaviour is beyond the scope of their interventions. The processing of a Section 29 appeal places heavy demands on a school in terms of time and with regard to expenditure in accessing legal advice. Where an appeal fails the resultant lowering of morale and sense of helplessness experienced by a school staff are considerable. The Task Force acknowledges that the process surrounding a Section 29 appeal is conducted with the utmost care and meticulous attention to ensure that justice is done to all. However, whatever the hard data in statistical terms regarding Section 29 outcomes, schools consistently report frustration with the experience. The final report from this Task Force will make considered recommendations in line with the legislation, aimed at improving this very time consuming, stressful and expensive process.

### **Engaging Parents**

The Task Force is struck by the discussion that hinges on the engagement of parents in their children's schooling. It appears to us that there are varying patterns of parental engagement ranging from total failure to engage, through to active participation in extra-curricular activities, policy formation and fundraising, with shades of involvement in between.

There is a constituency of parents that it is almost impossible to engage. These may be parents who have had negative experiences themselves at school and who find the prospect of any visit to a school, however benign, a threatening and formidable experience, and so fail to respond to invitations to visit the school and dialogue with school personnel. This poses problems for school personnel who would welcome working in a constructive way with these parents. Many issues are ironed out satisfactorily where school and parents work collaboratively towards a resolution of difficulties. Other information before the Task Force suggests that there are parents who are eager to become involved in schools, but who find that the schools are neither welcoming nor accepting of their engagement. There are parents who are neither resistant nor excluded, but who take the view that schools know best. These parents tend to trust the school to carry out its business without reference to them. These parents are supportive but at a remove. They are likely to share the school's value system, but are not visible in the school nor overtly contributing to its functioning. There are still other parents who may be hostile in their interactions with school personnel and who undermine the work of the school whether the discussion hinges on student progress or violation of acceptable norms of behaviour. The Task Force will examine these patterns of parental involvement further and will seek to make relevant recommendations aimed at improving what could be a powerful partnership between home and school.

### **Teacher Education**

There is a recognition across the board in the data available to the Task Force that the role of a teacher of adolescents in today's society is multifaceted, and in many ways different from how it was some 10-15 years ago. Today's young people are living lives that are in marked contrast to the lives lived by many of their teachers when they were young adolescents. In order to relate to their students today, to work with them in ways that are engaging and stimulating, to have a repertoire of teaching methodologies that they can enact, it is important that teachers be prepared adequately for this changing world. The Task Force received many submissions that made plausible arguments for high quality teacher education at all levels of the profession - preservice, induction, and continuing professional

development. Submissions noted specific themes that should form the core of continuing professional development, especially for those teachers who are working on a daily basis with students who present with challenging behaviour. The important question of teacher preparation will be considered by the Task Force and will be the subject of recommendations in the final report.

### **The diverse cohort and resource implications**

Schools today are required, and are willing, to be inclusive. In the main, schools have responded magnificently to the challenges posed by the cumulative and rapid change in the mainstream school composition. In recent years, in line with international trends, there has been a national policy to educate children with special educational needs in the least restrictive environment. There has also been a recent trend towards mixed ability classes. Our society is now a multiethnic society. As a consequence of all of these developments, the composition of a class of students today is very different from how it was even a decade ago. Not all schools in a geographical area enrol a full spectrum of students. Consequently, some schools more than others, have had to respond to the new demands of meeting the needs of the changing school cohort.

A wide range of resources is required to meet the needs of all students equally. Data before the Task Force suggest that there are structural difficulties in accessing resources that ideally should be available to schools requiring them. By the time resources are accessed, individual students may already be in difficulty with school authorities, or in some cases may have dropped out. The Task Force is coming to terms with the implications of this perceived roadblock in resource availability. Recommendations aimed at streamlining this will follow.

### **Empowerment of Students**

The Task Force welcomes the recent publication of the report on Second Level Student Councils in Ireland (2005) from the National Children's Office, as it endorses the advantages of allowing students to participate in the life of a school and to contribute to decision making as appropriate. The value of enabling

students to play a responsible and democratic role in school life was a point made to The Task Force from a number of sources. If empowered to do, students have the capacity to contribute in a mature and constructive manner to the solution of difficulties that may arise. It is short-sighted to see students solely in terms of problem creation. Making them part of the solution is a powerful approach. This too will be an area of additional recommendations from the Task Force.

### **The quality of leadership and professional competence**

A number of the submissions, while acknowledging the superb and dedicated work done by the majority of school personnel, referred to the negative consequences of under-performing teachers and ineffective leadership. It is recognised that problems relating to school discipline are exacerbated where the quality of the leadership and the competence of the professionals in a school are less than satisfactory. The Task Force proposes to examine this factor and to make recommendations accordingly.

### **A whole school approach**

It is clear from the submissions that schools must adopt a uniform and consistent approach to discipline matters. A code of behaviour is now mandatory for schools and forms part of a school's development plan. Greater coherence of the various dimensions that form part of a school's ongoing development is advocated so that the school ethos and culture reflect more the school's value system and mission statement. It is important to join up the dots that link student behaviour, curriculum, pedagogy and assessment issues. Some recommendations aimed at integrated thinking and coherent policy in these areas will be suggested.

### **Time to function effectively in role**

Many schools now have Care Teams established whereby members of staff have a designated care or pastoral role. This team plays a vital role in minimising the incidence of disruption in a school. However, with the current obligation to teach a prescribed number of hours per week, it is difficult for the Care Team to

discharge its role as effectively as it would wish. The consequences of this mean that breaches of indiscipline escalate that might have been defused had the Care Team been able to intervene earlier, or more comprehensively. The Task Force will look at this situation and will recommend ways aimed at streamlining the functioning of key personnel with designated care roles.

### **The transition from primary to post primary**

Many of the submissions point out the range of difficulties that some students encounter in making the transition from primary to post primary schools. There is evidence to suggest that schools that prepare carefully and sensitively for this transition are less troubled by disruption than schools that adopt a less proactive approach. The Task Force has identified some models of good practice in this area and will offer recommendations on this in the final report.

### **Rights and Responsibilities**

A recurring theme in the data was the view that many of today's students have a finely honed sense of their rights but some have a much less refined sense of their responsibilities. The view was also expressed that in some cases the rights of the student appear to take precedence over the rights of teachers. Teachers have a legitimate right to teach in an unfettered and safe environment. The Task Force will consider this and seek to make recommendations that will align the rights and the responsibilities of all who constitute the school community.

### **Interagency working**

Many of the submissions referred to the need for persons with a variety of expertise and skills to work with the most troubled students in our schools. It is not always that the most troubled cause the most difficulty, but schools are increasingly sensitive to the range of personal difficulties that many young students carry in to school today. It is unrealistic to expect the teaching staff to meet all student needs, especially those that may involve a range of issues beyond the remit of the teaching profession. Schools in contemporary society see the

value and necessity of working collaboratively with agencies both within and beyond the education sector. Cross-sectoral work helps to support vulnerable students through the education system. The Task Force intends to explore this more fully and to make recommendations as appropriate.

### **Provision for the seriously disruptive students**

Undoubtedly, one of the biggest challenges for the Task Force is to make prudent and educationally sound recommendations regarding the provision of on-site and / or off-site provision for the minority of persistently disruptive students who seem not to be responsive to any of the range of measures that schools habitually invoke to turn around seriously disruptive behaviour. The educational research literature and anecdotal evidence are ambivalent on the merits of Pupil Referral Units (PRU). Placement in such units may offer some kind of immediate solution to persistent disruption, but there is the risk that, in the long term, the best interests of those students referred to these units may not be served. The conundrum for the Task Force is to work out how to preserve the rights of the majority of motivated, engaged students who wish to learn and to achieve, in an unimpeded way, while at the same time safeguarding the welfare of the minority of students who may for a variety of reasons, outside the control of the school, challenge the system to breaking point. This latter group also has a right to education. The Task Force is grappling with how best to make provision for both categories of learners. Time is needed to reflect on this central issue and to weigh the evidence that is available to us from other jurisdictions that have set in place a continuum of provision in this area. Models of alternative provision for disaffected students already exist in Ireland. The Task Force plans to visit some such centres with a view to clarifying the contribution they can make to a continuum of provision for dealing with the issue of student disruption. In the light of our collective knowledge, we will make considered recommendations on this controversial issue of provision.

## Conclusions

Minister, the Task Force is conscious of the importance and the complexity of the task that you have set for us. As we have engaged with the work over the past five months, we have sought to take account of the context of a modern Ireland in which the lifestyle of our young students and their out-of-school culture may often be at variance with the culture of the school that they attend. We are empathic to the developmental phase that is adolescence; we well appreciate the challenge for schools in catering for a very diverse cohort of students; we are mindful of the expectations of parents, and the wider community regarding the role of schools in educating, in a holistic manner, those students enrolled in our schools. We are helped in our way forward by the many considered and comprehensive submissions and presentations that we have received.

Against this backdrop, we are guided by the Terms of Reference that you have set for us. In the final phase of our work, we will develop further many of the issues that are taking shape. As we progress, we are confident that we can do some good for our schools, for our students and ultimately for civic society. The issue of student discipline has so many facets to it that, as suggested earlier, it will require a response not just from individual sectors of the school community, but, also from the total spectrum of players working in harmony towards a common goal. Hence the call to all those who form part of the education community to engage with the issues and work towards a better way forward for our schools, and ultimately for society.

At this stage in our deliberations, it is clear, without doubt, to the Task Force that many of the recommendations that we will make in the final report will impose increased demands on public funds and may involve some realignment of the distribution of existing funds. As we seek to complete the mandate given to us by you and, in so doing, respond to the concerns that have been conveyed to us, we are confident that the benefits of our proposals will be sufficiently evident to warrant the provision of the requisite funding from your ministry. It is in that vein of optimism that we will resume our consideration of the issues.

## Membership of Task Force

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**Michael McKeon**, Secretary to the Task Force  
**Margaret Raftery**, Administrative Support