

# Anti-Bullying Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools

A Survey of Implementation Among School Principals



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## Introduction

The following report has been developed by ABC – National Anti-Bullying Research and Resource Centre (ABC) at Dublin City University arising from research conducted into the implementation of Anti-Bullying Procedures for Primary and Post Primary Schools which were published by the Department of Education and Skills in September 2013. These procedures were developed to give direction and guidance to school authorities and school personnel in preventing and tackling school-based bullying behavior. The new Procedures and an associated Department Circular 0045/2013 apply to all recognised primary and post-primary schools in Ireland.

The Anti-Bullying Procedures arose out of a review of the 1993 Guidelines on Countering Bullying in Schools, a forum hosted by the Minister for Education and Skills with the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (2012), and the *Action Plan on Bullying – Report of the Anti-Bullying Working Group to the Minister for Education and Skills* (January 2013) and as such they represent the most significant development in relation to tackling bullying in schools for 20 years. In these Anti-Bullying Procedures responsibility for tackling bullying among pupils falls to the individual school.

At the end of a period of 3 years of implementation, it was decided to undertake research to ascertain the extent to which these Procedures had been successfully implemented at a local level by school management. A survey was conducted by researchers at DCU's National Anti-Bullying Research and Resource Centre ([www.dcu.ie/abc](http://www.dcu.ie/abc)) with colleagues in DCU's Educational Disadvantage Centre ([www.dcu.ie/edc](http://www.dcu.ie/edc)) with support from DCU Institute of Education's shared research fund.

ABC is a national research and resource facility at DCU. Researchers at ABC were the first in Ireland to undertake research on school bullying (1996), workplace bullying (1999), homophobic bullying (2004) and cyberbullying (2009). ABC leads the field of research, resource development, and training in bullying, in Ireland and is an internationally recognised centre of excellence in bullying research.

The Centre's activities are currently funded by the Department of Education & Skills under the National Action Plan on Bullying (2013), the Irish Research Council, the EU's Erasmus+ Framework Program for Education, Training, Youth and Sport, DCU Research and Innovation Unit, and the Fulbright Commission. ABC works in partnership with other research centres in DCU including the *Educational Disadvantage Centre* and the *Centre for Assessment Research and Policy in Education* (CARPE). The Centre is also a strategic partner with the *Norwegian Centre for Learning Environment and Behavioral Research in Education* and the *Cyberbullying Research Centre* (USA).

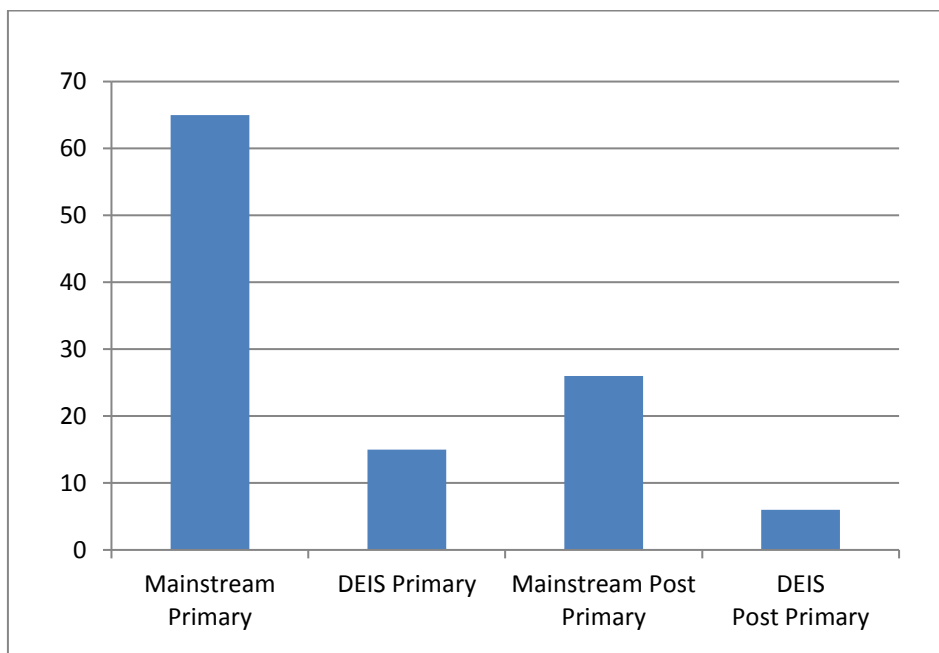
## Aims of the Study

The associated Department Circular 0045/2013 required all schools to fully comply with the Anti-Bullying Procedures no later than the end of the second term of the 2013/14 school year. By the time this study was conducted, in autumn 2016, schools had been implementing the Procedures at a local level for 3 years. The aim of the study was to establish the extent of the implementation by school management.

## Methodology and Profile of Participants

The survey was designed by researchers at ABC with colleagues in the Educational Disadvantage Centre, with further input from the Central Policy Unit of the Department of Education & Skills, the National Association for Principals and Deputy Principals (NAPD) and the Irish Primary Principals Network (IPPN).

The survey was mainly quantitative in nature, containing 37 closed questions specifically related to the content of the National Action Plan on Bullying (2013) and related Policies and Procedures, however, it also included 3 questions that allowed for a more qualitative response. The survey was initially distributed online to all school principals in Ireland (n = 4028) in October 2016 with reminders sent by email a further 4 times, before the survey closed in December 2016. There was a 23% response rate (n = 918) broadly representing most types of schools in Ireland. Participants described their school as one or more of the following: Mainstream Primary Schools (65%), Mainstream Post-Primary Schools (26%), DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) Primary Schools (15%) and DEIS Post-Primary (6%). The DEIS plan was introduced in 2005 to tackle educational inequalities among children and young people.



*Figure 1- Respondents by School Type*

## Findings

### *Policy*

Principals were asked if their school had an anti-bullying policy in place and if they had used the content of the template provided by the Department of Education and Skills' Anti-Bullying Procedures. The results point toward some success with the implementation of the Procedures as 100% of respondents reported that their school had an Anti-Bullying Policy which is a requirement of the Anti-Bullying Procedures and the associated Department Circular 0045/2013. Furthermore, 98% of respondents reported that they had updated their school's anti-bullying policy since 2013 to reflect the content of the template provided with the Anti-Bullying Procedures.

### *Prevalence and Impact of Bullying*

In relation to incidents of bullying, 42% of respondents stated an increase in reports of bullying since the introduction of the Procedures with the majority (79%) of principals reporting up to 9 recorded incidents of bullying per term.

The increase in the number of reported cases of bullying is probably more reflective of schools having more clarity on the definition of bullying and employing better reporting mechanisms, rather than an actual increase in the amount of bullying occurring in schools.

Principals were asked about the impact of bullying on the children in their schools. The overwhelming majority of respondents were unequivocal in their belief that bullying can have a negative impact on a child's attendance (96%) and academic performance (97%) at school. This points to a direct link between bullying and a heightened risk of early school leaving.

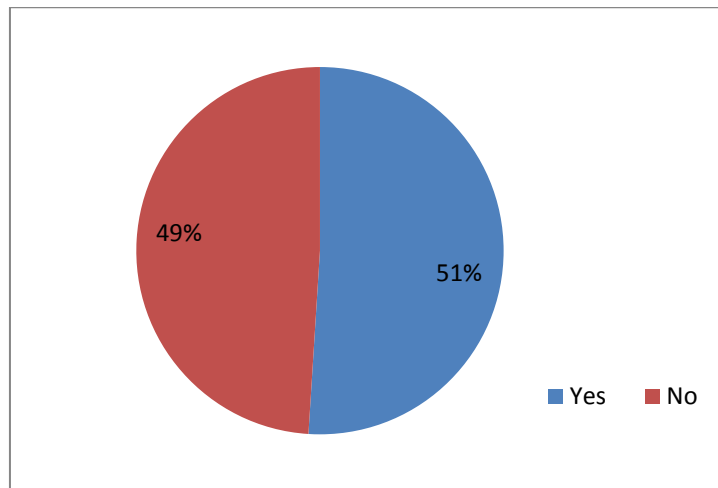
### *Tackling Bullying*

While our findings revealed that the majority of principals who responded to the survey had in place an anti-bullying policy and were aware of the possible negative impact of bullying on academic performance and attendance, the results show that schools are challenged when it comes to implementing the more practical aspects of the Procedures.

The Anti-Bullying Procedures require schools to identify the most suitable intervention for their school, and to research and understand both the techniques of intervention involved and the assumptions and rationale of particular methods. Only 42% of respondents reported that they had undertaken this type of research.

The Procedures also require schools to appoint a "relevant teacher(s)" to investigate and deal with cases of bullying. When asked if they had appointed a specific member of staff to undertake this task only half (51%) of respondents reported that a specific member of staff had been appointed to

investigate and tackle bullying in their school. A recent report for the European Commission went further in its recommendation that each school should establish a committee to develop a whole-school approach to tackling bullying (Downes & Cefai 2016). So our finding that just 51% of the principals surveyed reported that they had appointed a relevant teacher raises questions about 1) the role this teacher has in relation to other staff, parents and pupils, and 2) what steps have the other 49% of schools taken to implement a whole-school approach to tackling bullying.



*Figure 2- Schools that have appointed relevant teacher(s)*

The Anti-Bullying Procedures require schools to have specific supports in place for those who are bullied and those who engage in bullying behavior. In relation to supporting those who are bullied 75% of principals responded that they had specific supports in place while less (67%) reported that they had supports in place for those who engage in bullying. While the majority of principals confirmed that their schools provide specific supports for those who are bullied and those who engage in bullying behavior, it is a concern that 25% did not provide specific supports for those who are bullied and 33% did not provide specific supports for those who bully.

Principals were asked what additional resources they required, if any, in order to meet the requirements of the Anti-Bullying Procedures. The most frequently occurring replies are illustrated in Figure 3. Principals overwhelming preference was that the Department of Education & Skills provide a national anti-bullying programme, with training, for schools to implement.



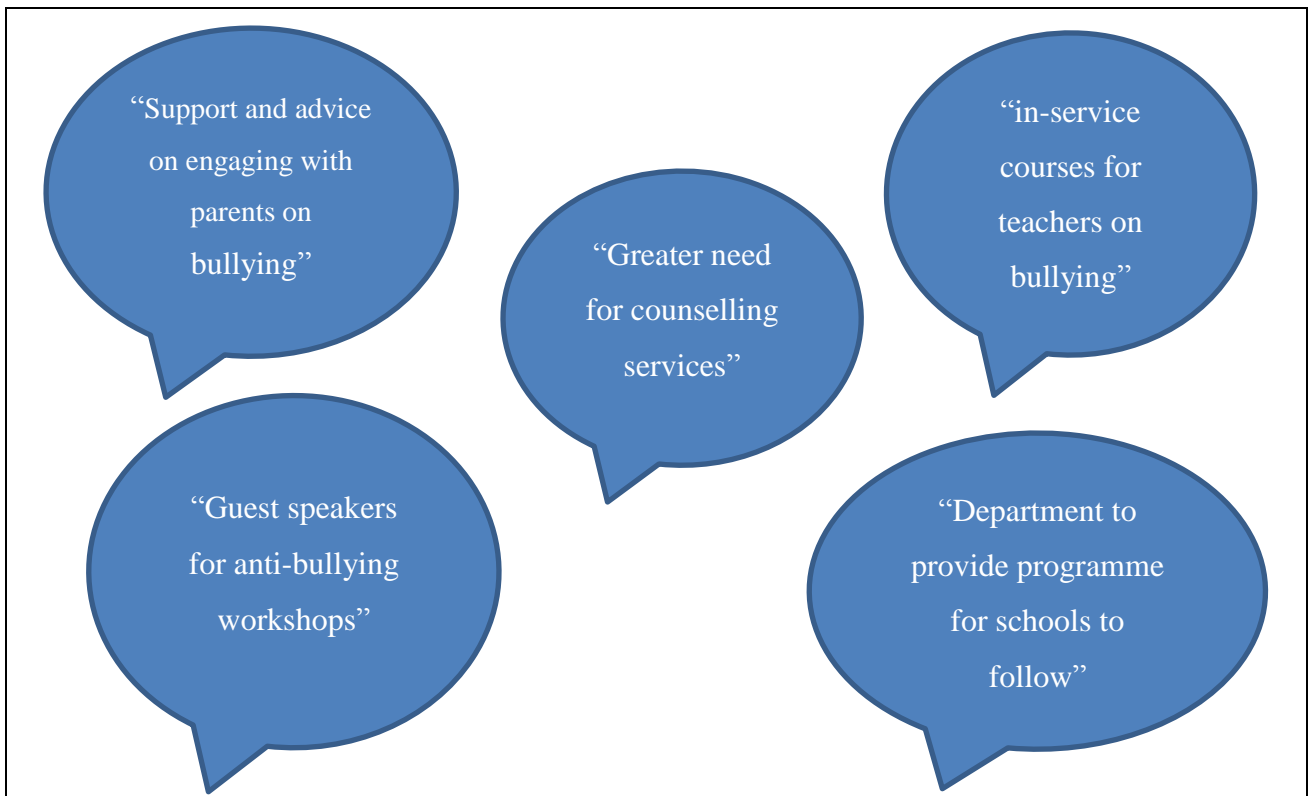


Figure 3- Requests for Further Resources to Support School Tackle Bullying

Principals were asked if children in their schools could easily access qualified counsellors when they experienced bullying but only 39% of respondents agreed that this was the case. This finding is of particular concern given the increasing and widespread recognition in international research that bullying impacts upon not only short-term mental health issues, but also risks long-term damage to mental health (Thornberg et al, 2013).

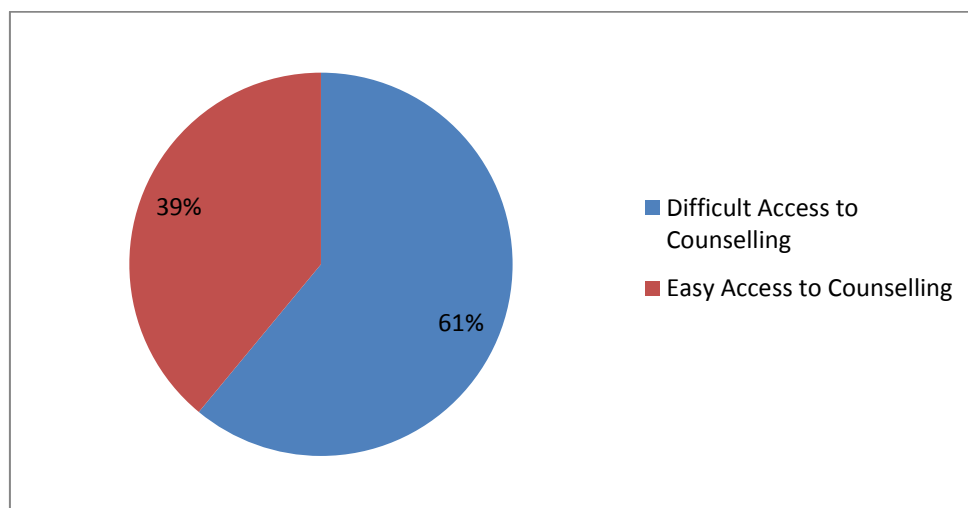


Figure 4- Access to Qualified Counsellor

95% of principals agreed that it is important for multidisciplinary teams of teachers and other professionals to work together to provide support for pupils/students and their families who experience extreme levels of socio-economic inequality which may result in bullying. This figure increased to 97% for DEIS schools. Multidisciplinary teams in and around schools are a basic feature of good practice in many European contexts (Edwards & Downes 2013) and are recommended in a range of EU Commission documents (EU Commission 2013, 2015).

## Conclusions

The key findings in this national survey clearly highlight in a positive way the significance of the introduction in 2013 by the Department of Education & Skills of National Anti-Bullying Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools. These Procedures provide clarity about bullying and an overarching national approach to tackling bullying at a local level in schools. The Procedures ensure that schools understand that they are required to be accountable for how they manage bullying. Our findings show that the introduction of the Procedures was a positive step in how the Irish school system tackles bullying, particularly in terms of developing local anti-bullying policies, raising awareness and reporting bullying.

With regard to principals' perceptions of the impact of bullying on attendance and academic performance at school, together with the reported gaps in access to qualified counsellors we are concerned about the long-term effects on those who are bullied and those who engage in bullying. A lack of access to counsellors risks a situation where problems associated with being bullied or engaging in bullying behaviour become worse without early intervention and supports. There is also a need for school management to prioritise fulfilling their obligation to implement the Anti-Bullying Procedures particularly in relation to appointing a relevant teacher and/or developing whole-school committees to tackle bullying in an ongoing way at local level.

There is overwhelming recognition across schools of the importance of multidisciplinary teams to provide support for pupils and their families who experience socio-economic inequalities which may result in bullying. This finding highlights a need for the Department of Education & Skills and the Department of Children and Youth Affairs to come together to develop a strategic approach to developing multidisciplinary teams in and around schools with a focus on bullying among other emotional needs of children.

The Action Plan on Bullying (2013) and related Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools has provided a national integrated strategic approach to tackling bullying in schools. However, based on responses from principals it seems that many of them have not been able to meet the Procedure's requirement to identify the most suitable intervention for their school. This includes identifying specific supports for those who experience bullying and those who engage in bullying. As such they are asking for more support in doing this, possibly through the introduction of some form of centrally approved anti-bullying programme that can be delivered, with training, at a local level. Such a programme would be informed by findings from national and international research that show the need to take a whole-school approach led by a specific staff member or a school committee (Downes and Cafai, 2016; O'Higgins Norman and Sullivan, 2017).

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